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MYSTERY MAGAZINE



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EDITOR'S NOTES

by Cathleen Jordan

Dame Ngaio Marsh, author of this month's Mystery Classic, "Death on the Air," wrote close to three dozen mystery novels, all of them featuring her Scotland Yard inspector and later superintendent Roderick Alleyn (and often his painter-wife Agatha Troy), but only four short stories, all published in our sister magazine EQMM. "Death on the Air" was the first story she wrote, in the late 1930's, though the second published (in the January, 1948, issue). And all Marsh aficionados will be glad to find Alleyn on the scene when murder occurs in a London townhouse (as suave as always and accompanied by his familiar cohorts Inspector Fox and Sergeant Bailey), despite the fact that it's Christmas morning and even Alleyn ought to get the day off.

The other three stories, for the record, were "I Can Find My Way Out" (1946), a theater mystery; "Chapter and Verse" (1973), starring Troy; and "A Fool About Money" (1974), a very brief, non-Alleyn tale.

Also in this issue . . . A new and particularly evocative story

by Margaret Maron called "On Windy Ridge." Ms. Maron's second novel, *Death of a Butterfly*, will be published by the Doubleday Crime Club in December; she tells us it's to be the first of a series about Lieutenant Sigrid Harald of the NYPD. Ms. Maron is one of several authors in this issue who are fond of farm or rural life, as it turns out; she enjoys "trying to photograph complete life cycles in the wild—especially butterflies and spiders. Our woodpile keeps turning up beautiful black widows." Dan Sproul, who has created a nifty problem in "The Snakebit Principle" (which doesn't have anything to do with snakes), dwells on "five acres harboring a host of animals. Collectively, throughout the day, a single passion drives them—to eat." Sproul drives himself—106 miles to work, each way, and confesses to a fascination for languages ("I speak passable Spanish and mediocre English").

Like his above two colleagues, Emory Smith, whom we introduce with "A Thirst for Revenge," his first story, is a Southerner and a farm-resider.

who spends time in his garden and orchard when he isn't writing. Vermonter Sherrard Gray lives "in a small cabin on a Vermont hillside with a dog and a cat." There must be something about rural life that goes well with an interest in languages: "I'm proficient in French, trying

to rehabilitate my German, and struggling with Greek and Latin, with Italian and Spanish on the horizon, and Chinese for the next life." Like a good many authors, Gray has had a varied career: "a ballroom dance instructor in Manhattan, stretcher bearer at Lourdes, roustabout

"King, Straub, and now Robert McCammon." ^{99*}

Wildly enthusiastic reviews greeted Robert R. McCammon's recent bestseller, *Mystery Walk*. Now, in his new novel, *Usher's Passing*, McCammon's dazzling imagination traces the descendants of the infamous family of Edgar Allan Poe's "Fall of the House of Usher."

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in the Gulf of Mexico." (To wit, Barry Kiel, author of "The Tree": "a number of things, from test driving outboard motors to preaching." And Stephanie Kay Bendel, currently Regional Vice President of the New England chapter of the Mystery Writers of America and author of "No One Ever Listens": "I did research and teaching in immunogenetics for four years at the University of Wisconsin" and "was the leader of a dance band for three or four years.")

And then there's Ron Butler, of course—anthropologist, former newsman, Southerner, obviously knowledgeable about Japanese. He does live in town—but he likes fishing. A lot.

In the last issue we talked about how one submits stories to AHMM; in this one we wanted to add a note about submissions to the Mysterious Photograph contest. It's helpful to us (though not required) if you put your

name and address on the same page as your story (some people put their addresses only on the envelopes they come in, which are easy to lose). And it also helps if you can put the month of the contest at the top of the page, as we receive entries for several months at the same time. And finally, entrants sometimes ask if more than one story per contest can be submitted. The answer is yes indeed. As many as you like.

Note from Pittsburgh: In the August issue we passed along to you the terms of a mystery plot contest being held by the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts for their "Murder Mystery Day," on September 16th. We've been notified that the winner, for "Murder in the Greenhouse," was Donna Henry of Glenshaw, Pennsylvania. The cash prize of \$250 was contributed by the Squirrel Hill Bookstore in Pittsburgh. Congratulations to Ms. Henry!

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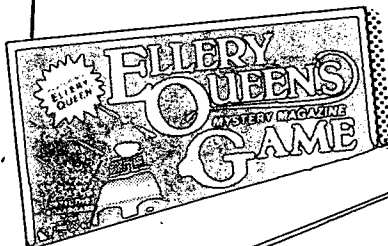
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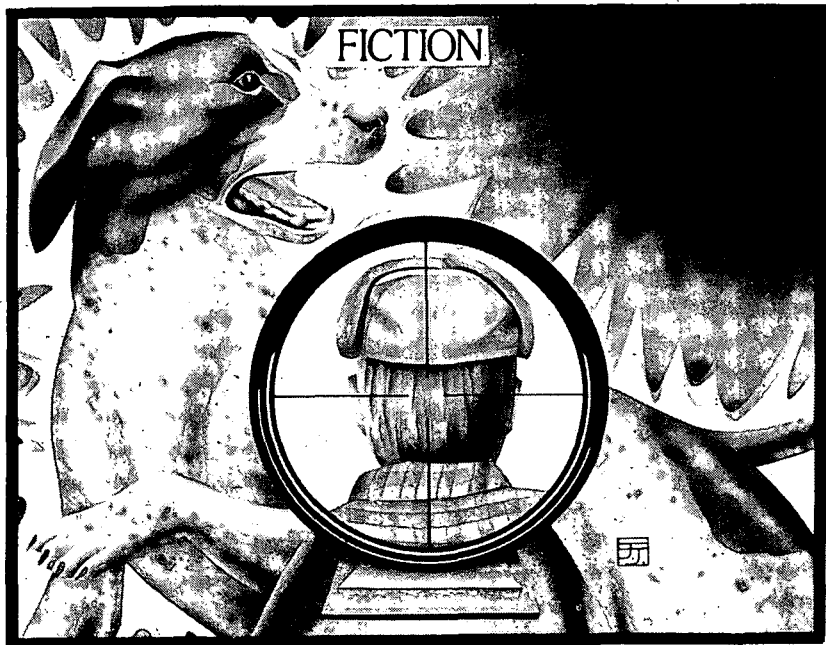
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FROM ONE
**MYSTERY
LOVER
TO ANOTHER**



On Windy Ridge

by Margaret Maron

Waiting is more tiresome than doing, and I was weary. Bone weary. "Seems longer than just yesterday those two went up to Windy Ridge," I said. "Two went up, but three were there, you know."

"Now what's that supposed to mean, Ruth?" asked Wayne.

Wayne's my cousin and a good sheriff. What he lacks in formal training, he makes up in common sense and a knowledge of the district that comes

from growing up here in the mountains and from being related by birth or marriage to half the county. Our grandmothers were sisters and we've run in and out of each other's houses for forty years. I knew he was wondering if my queer remark came from tiredness or because I half believe some of the legends that persist in these hills.

He walked over to the deck rail and looked down into the ravine, but my eyes lifted to the

distant hills, beyond trees that burned red and gold, to where the ridges misted into smoky blue. The hills were real and everlasting and I had borrowed of their strength before.

When I built this deck nearly twenty years ago, I planned it wide enough for a wedding breakfast because Luke Randolph and I were to be married as soon as he came home from Vietnam. It was May, wild vines grew up the pilings, and the air was heavy with the scent of honeysuckle and wisteria the day Luke's brother Tom came over with the crumpled telegram in his hand.

The hills haven't changed since then, but the red cedar planks have weathered to silver gray and Wayne looked at me uneasily across their width.

"You're not going ghostie on me, are you, Ruth? This isn't the first time a man's been shot up on Windy Ridge, and it won't be the last. Hell, Sam's already put in two complaints."

Feisty Sam Haskell owns a small dairy farm on the edge of Windy Ridge, and trying to keep his herd from being shot out from under him every year makes him a perennial source of tall tales. In exasperation once, he'd painted C-O-W in bright purple on the flank of every animal. Two were promptly shot.

Wayne sighed. "That's what puzzles me. Gordon Tyler was a furriner, but Noah knew better than to go into the woods the first day of deer season when all those cityfolk show up, blasting away at anything that moves without waiting to see if it's got two legs or four. Why'd he go?"

"Gordon wanted to try his new rifle, and he talked Noah into it," I said.

Yesterday had been one of those perfect October mornings with barely a hint of frost in the air. We'd just finished a late breakfast here on the deck: Noah Randolph, who was Luke's nephew, my niece Julie, and me. Julie had bubbled like liquid sunshine that morning, her red hair flaming like a maple tree. After a summer of flirting around with Gordon Tyler, she'd finally decided that Noah was really the one she wanted to marry, and her brand new diamond sparkled in the crisp air.

Noah was so much like my Luke—a mountain man, tall and solid, with clear brown eyes and a mane of sandy hair. Not handsome. His features were too strong and open. But a good face. A face you could trust your life with. Or trust with a niece who's been your life for fifteen of her twenty years after her parents died in a plane crash.

They were arguing over the last cheese biscuit when Gordon Tyler came up the side steps carrying a gleaming new rifle. Dark and wiry, he moved with the grace of a panther, and most women found him magnetic.

"I never liked Gordon," I told Wayne.

"Then why did you encourage him?"

"Because Julie didn't appreciate Noah. Remember how I dithered over Luke so long? Wondering if I loved him only because no one more romantic was around? It took that damn war—knowing he could be killed—to make me realize. Julie was me all over again, and Gordon had money, glamor, and the surface excitement she thought Noah lacked. I thought if she got a good dose of Gordon, she'd wake up to Noah's real value."

"It's usually a mistake to play God," Wayne said.

Which was exactly what I had thought as I fetched Gordon a cup from the kitchen and urged him to pull up a chair and how about a slice of ham? I knew I'd acted shabbily in using him to help Julie finish growing up, and I tried to ease my conscience by being overly hospitable when the pure and simple truth was that I wanted Gordon Tyler to go away. To get

off our mountain and out of Julie's life now that he'd served his purpose.

Until then, I'd rather enjoyed the seasonal influx of wealthy people who bought up our dilapidated barns and farmhouses and remodeled them into sumptuous vacation homes. Oldtimers might grumble about flatlanders and furriners and yearn for the days when Jedediah's store down at the crossroads had stocked nothing more exotic than Vienna sausage, but it's always amused me to step around a flopeared hound sprawled beside the potbellied stove and ask Jedediah for caviar, smoked oysters, or a bottle of choice Riesling.

Now I felt like one of the oldtimers, and I wished all flatlanders and furriners to perdition, beginning with Gordon Tyler, who'd bought the old Eddiston orchards as a tax shelter and play-pretty last year. We'd heard he'd inherited right much money, and he never mentioned any commitments to work beyond occasional board meetings up north. That gave him a lot of free time. Especially after Julie caught his eye this summer.

Julie said she'd been frank with him about Noah, but I was sitting across from Gordon when Noah and Julie announced their engagement out at Taylor's Inn,

and something about the way he went so white and still made me think he really hadn't expected it. The moment passed, though, and he was the first to jump up and offer a toast.

Before the engagement, Gordon had barely noticed Noah; yet in less than two weeks he transformed himself from Julie's rejected lover into Noah's good ol' pal. When Noah could get away from the farm he'd inherited from Luke, they even went squirrel hunting and fishing together.

"It always sort of surprised me that Gordon could shoot so well," said Wayne, "him being a city boy and all."

"Gordon never did anything in public unless he could do it best," I said bitterly. "He always had to win. By hook or crook."

"He won the shooting medal fair and square," Wayne observed.

"Only because the Anson boy couldn't enter."

"Come on, Ruth! You don't think Gordon had anything to do with Tim Anson's falling through his barn roof, do you?"

"I don't know what I think any more," I said crossly. "Gordon was up there with him, pointing out the rotten spots he wanted reshingled. Maybe he didn't know that section of roof was so far gone. All I'm saying

is that Tim's the best shot around, and Gordon didn't enter the match till after Tim had broken his arm."

"No, honey," Wayne said gently, "you're saying a lot more than that."

Wayne has known me all my life. Did he realize I'd spent the last twenty-four hours brooding over all that had happened since Julie and Noah became engaged?

When Gordon had interrupted our breakfast on the deck, I'd marked down the faint unease his presence aroused as a product of my own guilt pangs. Unlike Noah and Julie, I wasn't happy that he'd taken their engagement so well. Good-natured resignation seemed out of character.

Yet, as I brought out a fresh pot of coffee, there was Gordon showing Noah his new rifle. All morning the surrounding woods had reverberated with gunshots as deer season opened with its usual bang, and Gordon was anxious to test the gun. "It should stop a whitetail," he said.

"Oh, it'll do that," Noah agreed dryly. His big hands held the expensive, customized Remington carbine expertly, and as he laid his cheek against the hand-carved stock and

sighted along the gleaming barrel, a strand of brown hair fell across his eyes. Julie brushed it back with a proprietary hand, her ring flashing in the sunlight.

Gordon's eyes narrowed, but he smiled and said, "I know you don't like to go out opening day, but this may be my only chance. I'm flying to Delaware tomorrow on business, and there's no telling when I'll get back. Of course, if you're afraid to come, I can go alone."

"Common sense isn't fear!" I snapped, and Julie said, "Noah's staying right here. Too many fools show up the first day."

If we'd kept our mouths shut, he probably would have put Gordon off; but with both of us jumping in, Noah naturally stood up, tousled Julie's red-gold hair, and told her to quit acting like a bossy wife.

"How far do you feel like walking?" he asked Gordon.

"Why don't we try Windy Ridge? I saw a nice buck up there the other day."

As Noah grabbed his jacket and started to follow Gordon down the steps, he looked back at Julie. There were times when she could look very tiny and crushed, as if all the sunshine had gone out of her life, and she was doing it then. I'd have sworn that even her hair had gone two shades duller. Hurt

tears threatened to spill over her sandy lashes, and Noah returned, wiped her eyes with his handkerchief, and gently cupped her face in his strong hands.

"Quit worrying, honey. I'll wear my orange hunting cap. Nobody's going to take me for a deer, so cheer up and give me a kiss."

Brightness flowed back into her and she kissed him so thoroughly that it took an impatient horn blast from Gordon in the driveway below to tear Noah away.

"You be careful, Noah Randolph!" Julie called. She saw me grinning and smiled ruefully. "Was your Luke as pig-headed as Noah?"

"Never," I lied airily. "Any Randolph can be led around by the nose if you know how."

"Yah! And cows can fly," she giped, but she was content again and it did give us a chance to work on the wedding. By mid-afternoon we were well into the invitation list when we heard a car door slam on the drive below.

Julie pushed the papers away and rushed to the rail to peer over. Mild disappointment in her voice, she said, "It's only Cousin Wayne. Gordon's with him, but where's Noah?"

I joined her at the rail and as soon as I saw Wayne's face, my arms went around her instinc-

tively, as if I could shield her from what I knew he would say.

The next few moments were a blur of kaleidoscoping time. I heard Wayne's words, but they seemed overlaid by those other words twenty years ago.

"...some trigger-happy hunter (*Vietcong sniper*)... up on Windy Ridge (*on midnight patrol*)... happened so quickly... I'm sorry, Julie." (*Luke's dead, Ruth.*)

"I was up ahead in some thick brush," Gordon said shakily. "There was another party working the west slope, but we didn't think anyone else was up as high as we were. I heard the shot, and when Noah didn't answer, I ran down and found him lying there. Someone went crashing through the bushes. I fired my gun and yelled at him to stop, but he didn't. Thank God for those guys on the west slope. I didn't even know they were there until I heard their dog bark."

One of them was a doctor from Asheville, and he had stanchied the wound and applied first aid while the others rigged a stretcher. Together they got him down from the ridge and into a truck. Using CB radio, they had called for an ambulance that met them halfway into Asheville. Even so, it didn't look good.

"He's lost too much blood."

Wayne told me quietly.

While Gordon drove us to the hospital, Wayne remained behind to direct the hunt for whoever had shot Noah. It was a forty-minute drive, and Gordon kept blaming himself all the way. "If he dies, it'll be my fault," he kept saying.

"He won't die!" Julie said fiercely.

"Whatever happens, it won't be your fault," I told him. "Noah's a grown man. He went with you of his own free accord."

Tom and Mabel Randolph were in the intensive care waiting room when we arrived, along with her sister and some cousins. The news had traveled fast.

Noah was still in surgery, we were told. There was nothing to do but wait. "And pray," said Mabel Randolph, her eyes swollen from so much crying. "Please pray for him."

Time dragged. There was a snack area next to the waiting room, and hospital volunteers kept the coffee urn filled. More kinfolk arrived to share the wait, and to offer the homely comfort of fried chicken, ham biscuits, and stuffed eggs. Everyone kept trying to get Julie and me to eat, but Julie couldn't seem to swallow either.

Six hours after Noah had

been rushed into surgery, the doctor came to us, still dressed in his operating greens, the sterile mask dangling from his neck. Clinically, he described the path the bullet had taken through back and lung, just missing the spinal column, but nicking the heart and finally coming to rest in the left lung.

He talked about shock and trauma and blood pressure that wouldn't stabilize, and Mabel Randolph listened numbly until he'd finished, then said, "But he'll be all right, won't he?"

The doctor's eyes dropped and I liked him for that. Till then, he'd been so full of facts and figures that he could have been talking about soybean yields or how he'd gone about mending a stone wall. But he still had enough feeling that he couldn't look a dying boy's mother straight in the face and tell her, sure, he was going to be just fine. "Maybe, if he makes it through the night," he told Mabel, and his voice trailed off.

He seemed relieved when Wayne's sturdy form advanced across the waiting room. "Here it is, sheriff," he said, and gave Wayne a small packet. "I tried not to scratch it any further."

It was the slug he'd removed from Noah's lung, and Wayne passed it over to one of his deputies, who left in a hurry for the state lab.

"We blocked the roads and impounded every gun that came down the mountain," Wayne told us. "Then we did a sweep to make sure nobody was hiding up there."

By morning, Noah's threshold on life was stretched cobweb thin and Wayne had the lab report. Noah had been shot with a .30-caliber bullet.

Now, I like to trail along behind a pack of bell-voiced coonhounds on a moonlit night, and I can knock a possum out of a persimmon with my .22 as well as anybody, but such things as calibers, rifling, bores, and grains were beyond me. All I knew was that after the roads were blocked, every gun that came down from Windy Ridge, even Noah's old Winchester and Gordon's new Remington, was impounded, and all the rifles that could shoot a .30 caliber load were test-fired.

No match.

"What about the three men who helped carry Noah out?" I asked.

"All cleared," Wayne said.

It had been a long, tense night, and when he offered to take Julie and me home, I was ready to go, but Julie wouldn't be budged.

She promised to nap on one of the empty couches if I'd bring

her some fresh clothes that afternoon when I returned. We left with Gordon trying to persuade her to go down to the cafeteria with him for breakfast and Mabel telling her she needed to keep up her strength for Noah's sake.

As we drove home along winding mountain roads, Wayne said, "We found his white handkerchief up there where he fell, Ruth. Warm day like yesterday, a man works up a sweat tramping the woods. Guess he forgot and pulled it out to wipe his brow."

I looked puzzled so he spelled it out for me. "Say you've never done much hunting; say you've got an itchy trigger finger, and you spot something white flickering in the underbrush. You gonna wait till it turns around and shows antlers? Hell, no! A patch of white means a white-tail deer to you, so *bang!*"

At home, I showered and lay down, but tired as I was, sleep was a long time coming. I drifted in and out of troubled dreams in which Noah blended into Luke—Luke in his army uniform manning a lonely sentry post in a thicket of red-berried dogwoods and golden poplars. I saw the Vietcong sniper snaking through the underbrush and tried to cry out, but Luke

couldn't hear me. He fell slowly into the leaves, and the sniper covered his face with a white flag.

"But Luke doesn't have a white flag!" I cried, and came awake as the telephone rang.

It was Julie with a list of small items she wanted me to bring. She said they'd persuaded Mabel Randolph to let Gordon take her home for a few hours while she and Tom kept the vigil. There was no change in Noah's condition.

"No change is probably a good sign, don't you think?" Julie quavered. "It means he's holding on."

I said it did seem hopeful, but my heart grieved for what she still might have to face.

My dream of Luke had left me too restless and disoriented to sleep again. Instead, I found myself pacing the deck as I had twenty years ago, until—like twenty years ago—I got into my car and drove aimlessly, until despair finally eased off again and I realized that I was at the end of one of the old logging-trails that crisscross Windy Ridge.

The trees had begun to shed, and a cool gust of wind stirred the fallen leaves. I got out of the car and walked up a slope where Luke and I had often walked together. Squirrels chattered an alarm, a pair of bobwhites

exploded into flight at my feet, and, from farther up the ridge, a dog greeted me with sharp, welcoming barks.

I thought I knew every dog in the area, but I couldn't place the pointer that came crashing down the hillside so recklessly. For some reason, dogs lose all dignity with me. I'm not particularly fond of them, but through the years, I've become resigned to having them act the fool whenever I'm around. This one was no exception. He came prancing through the leaves, paw over paw, as if I were his long-lost friend, and tried to jump up and lick my face.

"Down, boy!" I said sternly and he sat obediently enough. He was white with the usual rust-colored markings, floppy ears, and intelligent brown eyes. His long, thin tail whipped the air to show me how happy he was for company, and I remembered that Gordon said he'd heard a dog bark just before Noah was shot. This dog, probably. He wasn't wearing a collar, but I was willing to bet he belonged to the party that helped Gordon with Noah, though I'd never heard of anyone using a pointer to hunt deer.

"Your people go off and leave you in all the excitement?" I asked, scratching behind his floppy ears.

More tail-whipping and another attempt to wash my face.

It was so peaceful there that I sat down on a nearby tree stump and let silence wash over me. The dog sprawled at my feet, his big head resting on my shoe. Bluejays played Not-It in the treetops, and scarlet maple leaves drifted down around us. Beyond the ridge, I heard the lazy tinkle of Sam Haskell's cowbells. It seemed unreal that Noah's life could halt amid such peace and beauty. Winter winds had stripped these flaming trees and spring rains had reclothed them in green twenty times since Luke and I had raced each other up these slopes looking for chinquapins or wild violets, and now Luke's nephew might soon be gone, too.

I buried my head on my knees and the dog nuzzled my ear sympathetically. When I stood at last, I heard him frolicking on the rise above me.

Those city hunters had given Noah Good-Samaritan help; I could at least keep their dog for them. He answered my whistle with a woof but didn't reappear.

Wayne told me he'd closed Windy Ridge to hunters, so we had the woods to ourselves, I thought. Except for the cowbells and birds and the sound of the dog running ahead through dry leaves, the place seemed silent and watchful.

I followed the dog up past a clump of red-leaved dogwoods until we were just below the last steep incline to the crest. Pulling myself around an outcropping of rock, I was startled to realize that this must have been the very spot where Noah fell. The ground was scuffed, and cigarette butts and bits of paper from an instant camera's film pack lay discarded from where Wayne's deputies had photographed the site.

Then I heard the dog bark farther up. He had stopped by a large fallen log; and when I approached, he pawed at the hollow end and whined as if he'd cornered something. Field mouse or chipmunk, I hoped. It was a little late for snakes, but you never know.

I found a stick and raked aside the leaves that stopped the hole. As I probed, my stick touched something soft that crackled almost like dry leaves. Gingerly, still thinking of timber rattlers, I pulled it out.

The bundle was long and heavy, wrapped in several layers of waterproof plastic, and it was worse than rattlesnakes. Even before I unwrapped it, I think I knew it was a rifle that had been bought for just one reason.

Abruptly, I was pushed aside, and Gordon Tyler snatched the gun from me, his eyes blazing

with anger and fear.

"How the devil did you know?" he cried. "You weren't even here."

"The dog—" I said.

"What dog?" he snarled. "You came around the rocks and went as straight to that log as if you'd watched me yesterday."

I looked about and the dog was nowhere in sight; but in the horror of the moment, one more oddity didn't register because I was suddenly remembering.

"Noah couldn't have pulled out a handkerchief! He left his with Julie. *You* dropped one there after you shot him, Gordon, to make Wayne think some trigger-happy fool saw a flash of white."

"And this evening, he'll think you stumbled across the killer hiding up here and got yourself shot for meddling."

The rifle barrel gleamed in the sunlight as he swung it up to aim. After that, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. The gun swung up; but before it could level, there was a blur of white and brown fur springing for Gordon's throat, then both plunged backwards onto the rocks below.

By the time I slipped and skidded down into the ravine, the gash on Gordon's temple had quit bleeding and there was no pulse.

I thought the dog would be

nearby and I whistled and called, fearful that he might be lying somewhere among the rocks, hurt and dying, too.

Eventually, I had to give up and climb out of the ravine; yet, though dazed from my brush with death and from learning that Gordon had shot Noah deliberately, I was vaguely soothed by a sweet fragrance and was even able to wonder what autumn-blooming plant could so perfume the air.

Now Wayne and I waited on my deck and watched twilight deepen the blue mountains while Gordon's body and Gordon's gun were examined in distant laboratories.

At dusk, one of Wayne's deputies stopped by. "Sorry, Miss Ruth, but we looked under every log and rock in that ravine and there's no sign of your dog."

"I appreciate your looking, but he wasn't mine," I said. "He belonged to those other hunters yesterday."

"They didn't have a dog with them," Wayne said gently. "I asked. And Sam Haskell says he hasn't seen any stray pointers up that way, either."

I shrugged and didn't argue. Gordon had denied the dog, too. Maybe I was getting senile.

Once more, Wayne called the lab, and this time he learned that a test bullet from Gordon's second gun matched the one removed from Noah's lung. Ten minutes later, the medical examiner phoned to report that Gordon's death was from a broken neck and, no, except for the gash on his temple, no other marks; certainly no teeth marks at his throat.

The phone rang again and this time it was Julie. "Noah's blood pressure's stabilized and they think he's coming out of the coma!"

Her voice sparkled with radiant thanksgiving, and a huge weight rolled off my heart.

I've heard that people often don't remember the actual moment when they were hurt; but someday soon, I will ask Noah whether or not he heard a dog bark just before Gordon fired at him. *Something* up there had thrown Gordon's aim off just enough to save his life.

Yet, even if Noah doesn't remember, it won't really matter because I suddenly identified the sweet fragrance I'd smelled earlier. All around me, trees and vines flamed with October colors; but in that ravine up on Windy Ridge, the air had been heavy with the honeysuckle and wisteria of May.

FICTION

For Goodness' Sake

by Sarah Gilbert

THOMPSON/84



Illustration by George Thompson

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If Maggie Torrance hadn't won fifty thousand dollars in the Irish Sweepstakes, Joe Michaels would never have come here to Plattville, so she wouldn't have married him and been in danger of his killing her for that money.

Maggie must be hugging forty, but she's as gullible as a two-year-old. Not only gullible, but good. Maggie is good through and through. Too good for her own good, as the saying goes. She's not bright. I believe a person has to be dumb to be totally good. But dumb, good, and gullible, that's Maggie.

She's been the waitress at the Busy Bee Cafe on Main Street since quitting high school in the tenth grade because her father took off and left her mother with no money and five kids, Maggie being the oldest.

She helped raise the younger kids; then she took care of her ailing mother until she died a year or so ago. Maggie never married, that is until Joe Michaels latched onto her.

I'm about ten years older than Maggie, been a widower for longer than that. When my wife died, I told myself I'd never marry again, and not because I loved her that much, if you know what I mean. I'm sort of a philosopher, long on observing life and short on making a living. Right now I rent a dingy

room in the town's cheapest rooming house and manage barely to get along on what I earn from a part-time book-keeping job, and I hate book-keeping.

Maggie being the way she is, she's a pushover whenever anybody's selling tickets to anything, from the church raffle to some doings at the Elks Lodge. That's how she happened to buy the ticket she won on, got it from Old Jake Burns when it was the last one in the book and nobody else would buy it. Most folks in Plattville think the best way to handle money is to save it.

When word got around that Maggie won that fifty thousand dollars, her picture was on the front page of the Plattville Post. The Busy Bee Cafe, being the only eatery right in town, has a steady trade but it's not swamped with business, partly because Arne Swenson who owns it isn't exactly a great cook and partly because a lot of folks in town don't eat out much. Anyway, business boomed with people coming by to gawk at Maggie and ask what she was going to do with her winnings.

Maggie's tall, almost as tall as I am, and I'm six feet. She has one of those pushed-in faces like a Pekinese, and thick yellow hair done in inverted beehive style. She always wears a

handkerchief the size of a pillow case, white with pink edging, stuck in the top pocket. She's not too swift at moving around, being on the heavy side, but she's willing and good-natured and she's a fixture at the Busy Bee by this time. It's located between the drugstore and the hardware store on Main Street. There's a counter at the far end, four booths along the side with green plastic benches, a couple of tables in the center, and plastic daisies in empty jelly jars on the tables.

I go in there once in a while for a nutty doughnut and coffee when I have a little extra money. I was at the counter a couple of days after her picture was in the paper. Flora Twill, the town's busiest gossip, sat next to me, taking small sips of her coffee and twittering, "Maggie, are you going to quit your job?"

Although Maggie must have heard the same question at least a hundred times by now, she took her time answering, wrinkling her forehead before she said in her slow way, "I don't know yet."

I'll admit that right then a little thought occurred to me along the lines that fifty thousand dollars would go a long way toward getting me out of that crummy room and away from bookkeeping.

As bad luck would have it, a

few days after that I got sick with what started as a chest cold and turned into pneumonia. I was hospitalized for the first time in my life.

When I got out, my good friend Peter Cullen brought me food and whatever else I needed while I was recuperating. Peter and I go back to high school days. He's married, his wife is a flighty sort, and he says her cooking is worse than at the Busy Bee. He eats there quite often.

I was pretty well on my way to recovery one day when he came to my room with some take-out chicken from one of those franchise places on the outskirts of town. I'd been sitting in the shabby armchair by the one window, which looks out on the garbage cans. He handed me the box, saying "Eat it while it's hot."

He grinned as he sat down on the edge of the bed. "Guess what? Maggie Torrance has a boyfriend! Little guy named Joe Michaels. Showed up less than a week after she won that money, nobody knows where he came from. He has a room at the Regent" (that's the only hotel in Plattville) "and he's at the Busy Bee all the time Maggie's there, making up to her."

I didn't like that news one bit. While I was sick I'd thought a lot about Maggie and made up

my mind I needed her. Well, okay, so I needed her money, but I couldn't have one without the other. Along comes this Joe Michaels out of nowhere and it didn't take a genius to figure out it was the money, not Maggie, that attracted him.

A couple of mornings later, on a nice mild summer day, I walked the four blocks to the Busy Bee, feeling a bit weak but not too bad. I know everybody in Plattville at least by sight, so the man at the counter holding Maggie's big hand while she sort of simpered down at him had to be Joe Michaels. An elderly couple in one of the booths called for more coffee, and while she went over there I sat down next to this dude. He looked to be in his thirties. He had a smooth baby face, dark shiny hair, and he wore white pants and shirt and a navy blazer with brass buttons. I judged he couldn't be more than five and a half feet tall. He had his nose in a newspaper. I looked over at it. It was the financial section of last Sunday's *New York Times*.

I said, "Stranger in town, right?"

He pretended not to hear me, so I pretended that I hadn't noticed what he pretended and I said, "Luke Turner's my name."

When he threw me a quick, annoyed glance, I saw what I'd

suspected; his eyes were too close together, mean and shifty.

"Joseph Michaels," he said as though it hurt him to tell me. He went back to his paper. I wondered whether he was studying what stocks to buy after he'd fleeced Maggie out of her money.

She was back at the counter by then, waiting for me to order, but her eyes were on Joe Michaels and I didn't like what they expressed, kind of a hunger, it was.

As I ate my nutty doughnut, this character next to me folded the paper, looked up at Maggie, and as if I didn't exist, he started telling her about how wonderful it would be to live close to nature with the one you love, close to the whispering waves, stuff like that. Maggie was so wrapped up in what he was saying she didn't notice when I left.

Well, the next day I had sort of a relapse and had to take it very easy for another couple of weeks, so it was that long before I got back to the Busy Bee. During those weeks my friend Peter was out of town on a selling trip. That meant, since I'm not friendly with the broken-down types who live where I do, that I had to drag myself down to the corner grocery when I needed food. To make things even worse, most of my small savings were gone. Believe me,

I learned the hard way how tough it is to be sick and poor besides. I did a lot more thinking, the upshot being that I was more entitled to marry Maggie than this Joe Michaels. I'd known her a lot longer, and besides, I was tired of being broke.

Well, when I finally walked into the Busy Bee, I saw Burt Markham's girl Mary behind the counter. She's about eighteen, skinny, with hair like a dust mop that's had a thorough shaking.

"Where's Maggie?" I asked as I hoisted myself onto the stool.

She giggled. "Where you been? Maggie's married. Don't work here any more."

I knew the answer, but I asked anyway. "Who's she married to?"

"To that Joe Michaels! They went over to Brentville and got married. Didn't tell anybody till they came back and he moved in with her."

Leaning on the counter, she confided, "They're not in town any more. Put a down payment on that old Hanks place, down by the river, you know. They moved out there. Nobody else around here was fool enough to buy it, even if it was cheap, practically falling down like it is. Everybody's talking about how Maggie just goes along with whatever he wants."

I shook my head. "It's crazy

to move down there! Not a soul nearby, the house is falling apart, and that dirt road going out there is murder."

"For sure." She giggled again. "Well, that's love. What can I get for you?"

"Changed my mind," I muttered. It didn't make sense to buy that dump, I told myself as I walked back. It was only a little past nine in the morning, but it was already warm. I walked slowly, thinking. The only logical reason Joe could have for going out there would be to get Maggie away from everybody and so make it easier for him to get rid of her.

By the time I got to my place I'd made up my mind. I had this nagging feeling that Maggie was in danger, and I decided to take my old jalopy and drive out to that house.

Once you get out of town, the mud road runs rutted and dusty through a deserted stretch of country. I was sweating by the time I finally drove up.

It looked like a haunted house, separated from the river by maybe a hundred yards of rock-strewn beach. The house had two stories and a tall attic with a small round window at the top. The outside paint was gone, the boards curled and dead looking, the color of sardines in a can. A couple of half-broken steps led to the sagging porch.

The rickety front door was closed. I banged on it, but nobody answered. I banged harder, feeling sweat pour over me. Then I went out back and there they were, the two of them, at the end of an overgrown apple orchard. I spotted Maggie sitting down near a wall built of huge, irregular stones. Here and there on either side the wall had collapsed. I looked for her husband but didn't see him at first; then he came up behind her lugging a big rock that weighed down both his hands. It looked to me like he might be fixing to bash her head in with it.

I yelled, "Hi, folks!" as loud as I could and went crashing through the trees.

When I got near them, the bridegroom gave me a sour look. He'd already set the rock down. Maggie was all smiling and happy to see me.

"Luke! How nice for you to come visit us!"

"Thought I'd drop over to wish you the best," I smiled. I looked over at Joe. "Dangerous to sit so close to that wall, isn't it?" I asked. "Could be a nasty accident. Might even kill somebody."

Maggie answered, waving her hand at a small area of cleared ground nearby. "We're making a rock garden. Joe says it'll make the place a lot prettier."

She got to her feet. "Come in the house. I'll make us some coffee."

As the three of us walked together, with Maggie in the middle, she added, "Joe's like a kid out here!"

We broke ranks to get through the close-growing apple trees with their overgrown branches. When we came out on the beach she added, "Joe wants to fix everything at once! Yesterday he was set on us going up to the attic, and I darned near fell through a big hole up there! Almost backed right into it. Joe was showing me the view. I turned around just in time. Joe was scared to death, weren't you, honey?"

I didn't hear any answer from honey, who was walking ahead.

Inside the front door I noticed a pair of hip-length black rubber boots, the kind fishermen wear. The house smelled of mold. Downstairs there was a living and a dining room and a big kitchen at the back. There were a few beat-up sticks of furniture. A stairway led from the side of the living room to what must have been the bedroom upstairs.

We went into the kitchen. Maggie apologized, "There's lots to do. Lucky the electricity's okay. My furniture and everything'll be here soon. Joe's going to bring it down any day now,

isn't that right, honey?"

The screen door at the back was an empty, weathered frame. I swatted at a mosquito on my arm.

Maggie said, "Lots of mosquitoes here on account of the river. Joe loves it, though, he's a real good swimmer. Going to show me how to swim one of these days, isn't that right, honey?"

She reached for Joe, raised him up, and crushed him against her. Joe struggled until she put him down. He saw me watching, so he put on a phony grin, reached up, put his arm around her waist, and said, "Whatever you say, sweetheart. Whatever makes you happy!"

The way she lighted up when he said that made me understand the question I'd been asking myself—why the hell she married Joe Michaels. It was simple enough. Probably nobody—no man, that is—had ever told her he loved her, and she needed to be loved. Joe Michaels gave her that, or at least she thought so.

I told them I couldn't stay for coffee. I tried to get a minute alone with Maggie to warn her to be careful, but Joe stayed with us.

On my way back I worried more than ever about Maggie. I decided to get my long-unused camping gear and come back,

set it up on a hill not too far from the old Hanks place, in a heavy stand of trees. I figured next day I'd pay them another visit to let them know I was there. There wasn't any time to lose. If Joe knew I was watching him, he'd think twice before he tried anything more.

I was exhausted, but by early evening I'd settled in. Using my binoculars, I had a good view of the house and the river when I stood at the edge of the trees.

Come dark, I was glad there was a full moon that lit up the water and paled the sky. Watching the house and then the river's edge in front of it, I saw the two of them come out, cross the beach area, grab hold of a rowboat moored there, and start pushing it through the tall weeds between the beach and the water.

I started off fast down the hill, tripped over something, and fell sprawling, half stunned. I discovered I wasn't really hurt except for the stinging in different parts of my body. After a while I went on, but slower, and by the time I got to the beach, I could see the boat was out a ways on the rippling surface of the river. There was something wrong, though. The boat was upside down.

Peeling off my shoes, shirt, and trousers I pushed through the weeds like a crazy man,

tearing them aside. The river bottom was slimy under my feet. Then I was in the clear, swimming toward the bobbing, overturned boat. When I reached it, hoping Maggie would be holding onto it, there was nobody there. Some yards to my left I heard a muffled cry and a splash. I shot over there and dived under, groping until my fingers felt a solid form. I pulled her up—yes, it was Maggie—her body was a dead weight. I managed somehow to get back to those weeds. They were like claws dragging at us. Maggie weighed a ton. I was breathing like a runner at the end of a long race by the time I finally put Maggie face down on the ground and lay gasping beside her.

I was relieved when she turned and bent over to gag and retch. Finally she lay back. By then I'd caught my breath, discovered my trousers were nearby and put them on, and felt much better. There was moonlight enough to see Maggie had on those hip-length rubber boots I'd noticed in the house.

Maggie moaned, "Joe! Joe!"

I leaned over her, saying gently, "It's Luke, Maggie."

"Luke! Where's Joe? He must have drowned!"

"He's not drowned, that's for sure," I told her. "He's fine."

"Oh, I've got to find him! He said it would be so beautiful out there in the moonlight, and now he's gone!"

I said again, "He's fine. Happy as can be, Maggie, thinking he's gotten rid of you."

"What are you saying, Luke? You're crazy!"

I sat up. "You'll find him at the house."

She sat up, too, bending to tug at those boots.

"Why are you wearing those damn things?" I demanded.

"Joe wanted me to. Help me get these off, please!"

I helped her struggle with the boots. It was like they were glued onto her, or like trying to get an oversized cork out of a wine bottle. We were both panting by the time we got them off.

Maggie demonstrated her one-track mind. "You really think Joe's at the house? He's okay?"

"I'll guarantee it," I told her. "Are you able to walk? Here, let me take your arm."

As we staggered toward the house, she shivered. "Oh, I only hope he's safe!"

There was no use my saying anything just then. I was careful to open the door very quietly. The only light inside was reflected from the hallway upstairs.

When Maggie opened her mouth to call out, I hissed at her to be quiet. Standing

there, we heard cheerful whistling from upstairs. Then Joe came to the head of the stairs, rubbing at his hair with a towel. He wore jeans, and a T-shirt, and they looked dry.

He bounced down the stairs, still whistling. Just before he got to the bottom, I pushed Maggie forward and I stood beside her. We must have looked like ghosts, in that dim light.

The whistling stopped. He stared at us. I heard him swallow. Then he started toward Maggie.

"Maggie! I was worried about you! You're okay, then?"

She said uncertainly, "Yeah, Joe. I'm okay."

"I sure was worried about you!" he repeated.

"Were you, Joe? Were you really?" Her voice was eager. She obviously wanted to be convinced. It was time for me to point out a couple of things.

"Maggie," I said, "did you hear him whistling just now? It was a happy whistle, wasn't it? And did you notice that he's wearing dry clothes? He's not out there looking for you in the river, is he? He'd be doing that if he really was worried, wouldn't he? Joe knew you couldn't swim. He had you wear

those heavy boots so they'd pull you down, so you couldn't do anything but drown when he overturned the boat. Then he headed back here and thought everything was okay—okay for him, that is. Come on, Maggie, face it. He tried to drown you."

"Don't believe him!" Joe cried, Joe in his fresh dry clothes, but not whistling any more.

Maggie turned to bury her face in my shoulder. I put my arm around her.

Things were working out just fine. I hadn't "wooded" Maggie until now, but this made a good beginning. She might not bring charges against Joe Michaels, being goodhearted as she is, but she'd certainly get an annulment, or a divorce, or whatever was necessary to be rid of him. I'd be there to help her all along the way.

After all, I had saved her life, and I'd make sure to treat her lovingly, romantically. There was no reason we shouldn't eventually get married. And after that—well, I'd learned some of the things not to do from Joe Michaels. I certainly wouldn't try rocks, or a hole, or attempt to drown her.

I've got my own plan all worked out.

The Snakebit Principle

by Dan A. Sproul



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Warren Dandy slid his empty glass in little circles on the moisture-laden, real mahogany bar, checking the clock on the back-bar every few seconds. Although his name was Dandy, he didn't much fit the image. His attire was well-worn, with a rumpled quality rarely seen in the western world.

Something in the mirror behind the stacked glasses and whisky bottles caught his attention. He wheeled around on the stool to face the door and the tall fellow just coming through it. Four or five regulars were sitting at the bar; some ten or so other patrons were scattered among the tables. It was too late for the dinner trade, too early for the serious drinkers. Dandy mo-

tioned to the tall newcomer.

"Hey, Fallon . . . over here!"

Fallon hiked himself onto the next stool.

"I wasn't sure you'd show up," Dandy greeted him. "What are you drinking?"

"Warren, I wouldn't have recognized you. You're looking good," Fallon said. "Whatever you got there is okay. I haven't seen anybody from the class of '57 since the last reunion in 1982. Missed you there, by the way."

"Two Manhattans, Rudy," Dandy instructed the bartender. He turned his attention back to Fallon. "I'm glad you could make it on such short notice. I know you probably keep pretty busy chasing headlines and whatnot."

"Yeah. Sorry I'm late. I had to cover a city commission meeting tonight. I still have to get back to the paper and file the story for the early edition. . . . But what the hell, I got time for a quick one."

Dandy checked the clock again. It was nine thirty-three. "Well, I called you because I've got a story for you. I don't know whether you'll be able to print it or not." He took a sip of the Manhattan. "How much do you know about gambling, Al?"

"More than the next guy, probably. I was a sports writer when I started out. You can't

live in Miami for over forty years and not bet on something."

Dandy nodded. "Good. Maybe you can follow what I'm going to tell you, then. You remember when we got out of school, I went on to Florida State, got my teaching certificate?"

"Sure. We talked about it at the five-year reunion. How come you never made any of the high school reunions after that first one? Remember how we got smashed and went up to that strip joint on 136th Street? Hell, I haven't seen you for so long I thought you'd died, until I got your call tonight."

"Tell you the truth," Dandy responded, "I was ashamed to go to any of the reunions. I was teaching science and math at a high school up in West Palm when my wife left me. You remember Jill, from the reunion? Kind of broke me up at the time. I started drinking pretty heavy. Lost my job teaching. Things just went to hell after that."

The cordiality Fallon had been oozing seemed visibly to dry up. He drew back on the stool a bit. "I guess I could let you have a few dollars. How much do you figure you need?"

Dandy looked at his old schoolmate as if his necktie had caught fire. Then he tried to laugh.

"I didn't bring you down here to make a touch," he said. "As a matter of fact . . ." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a money clip. He relieved it of five one-hundred-dollar bills, crisp new ones, and slid them down the bar toward his listener.

"This is for taking the trouble to come by," he explained. "I own this bar and several more like it. I own the apartment building next door and five or six more *just like it*. I don't even know how much I'm worth . . . more than eight million last time I checked. I own a race-horse worth more than you'll make if you work until you're ninety-three." A needless rebuke he regretted at once. But it was done. He turned back to his drink, allowing this revelation to sink in on his old chum.

Fallon picked up the five hundred in his hand and fondled it a bit. "Look . . . I'm embarrassed. I just couldn't understand after all these years why . . . I mean . . . Hell, I can't take this." He slid the money back in front of Dandy.

Dandy folded the money up and jammed it into Fallon's suitcoat pocket, just behind the hanky. "Take it. Your time is worth something. It would make me feel better if you kept it."

"Okay, if it makes you feel

better. I can use the money."

"One thing I always liked about you, Al, you never were very pretentious. Now, where was I? . . . Oh, yes, things really went in the toilet after Jill left. She moved back in with her family in Minnesota. Never did hear from her again. For a long stretch there, ten or twelve years, I just bummed around. Never had a job. Drank a lot. Got to playing the horses, dogs, betting the football and basketball games. Kept me in a little money. When I went broke—which I did quite often—I'd get a job as a dishwasher or work as a day laborer."

Dandy paused in his tale to watch the ten o'clock news come over Channel Six on the color TV at the end of the bar. The lead story concerned a Russian protest over the proposed launching of a U.S. "Killer" satellite scheduled for liftoff at six A.M. the next morning. He watched for a minute or so, then continued his story.

"I don't remember the exact date it happened. I know it was just after the Tampa Bay Buccaneers acquired a franchise in the NFL. They weren't too hot in the beginning. Lost every game they played the first year or two. It was in this very bar. I was sitting right here on this stool, pretty well in the bag. I think it was Tampa Bay against

Dallas, but I'm not sure, it's been so long. Anyway, everybody was crowded up to the bar waiting for the game to start when this guy walks in. Even though I was a bit drunk at the time myself, I could see that this guy was absolutely bombed out of his gourd. He stands down at the end of the bar there," Dandy pointed to the spot, "and he yells out that he will give anybody in the place Tampa Bay and twenty points. Nobody takes him up on it. Then he announces that he will give Tampa Bay forty points. He wants to bet fifty dollars. Most everybody in here then didn't have fifty on them. But one guy steps up and plunks down a fifty dollar bill on the bar. The drunk matches it and the barkeep holds the bet. Well, anybody who knows water runs downhill knows the drunk has got no chance to win this bet. Not even Tampa Bay can lose by forty points. It's almost obscene. Everybody in the place knows the drunk is going to lose his shirt on this one. And the guy who makes the bet with the drunk . . ." He paused to point to the end of the bar. "Incidentally, that's him down there. His name is Winky. Winky knows with a certainty that he's just made an easy fifty, like finding it in the parking lot. Except a funny thing happens

"The score in the last four minutes of the game is Dallas forty-two, Tampa Bay zero. Tampa fights down to the sixteen yard line. Since they don't want to get skunked, they try a field goal. It's a chip shot. That should make it easy. There's a bad snap from center, they hurry it, and the kicker misses off to the right. In the closing minutes, Tampa tries two more field goals. Each time I get the feeling they're spinning their wheels. It's futile. There's no way they are going to put any points on the board. My feeling is correct. Almost like it's preordained, they miss two more field goal attempts. Dallas wins it forty-two to nothing. The drunk wins an impossible bet. That's when I first started thinking about it."

"I don't follow you . . . thinking about what?"

"Well, it occurred to me—I mean, it was almost like the bet determined the outcome of the game instead of the other way around. I guess it was the science teacher in me finally coming back out. . . . Whatever it was, I was intrigued. I got to talking with Winky."

Al Fallon interrupted. "Look, Warren . . . I don't want to be pushy or anything, but I've got to get back to the paper before midnight to get this commission story in. So if you could just

tell me the gist of it . . . ”

“There is no way to tell the gist of it,” Dandy snapped back, with a trace of frustration. “It took me more than six years to figure it out. How can I explain it to you in twenty minutes? You have to understand about Winky, he was the key.”

“Okay, so what about Winky?” Fallon relented, remembering the five big ones in his breast pocket.

“He’s got this nervous tic in his right eye—makes him look like he’s winking all the time. I guess you could call him a loser . . . just a wino bum. His specialty is snatching change off the bar. At least it was when we met. He likes to bet. He’ll bet on anything. And I guess you could say he’s not too bright, either. I learned most of what I know about the Snakebit Principle from Winky.”

“The Snakebit Principle?”

“Well, I had to call it something. Everybody who knows Winky claims he’s snakebit—that is, no matter what he does, he can’t win a bet. Of course that’s not entirely true. He bet on Coastal in Spectacular Bid’s Belmont. That was the bet that tipped me to his cycle.”

“Hold on—wait a minute. You’re losing me.”

“Sorry, I’m getting ahead of myself . . . you want another drink?” Fallon slid his empty

glass forward. Rudy, the bartender, put fresh ones down without being asked.

Dandy began again. “Winky was truly snakebit, if that’s the term for it. It was hard for me to believe he never won any bets. I started hanging around with him. I got a little notebook to keep track of his bets . . . you know, how much was bet, with whom, the type of bet. It was amazing, he made three to five bets a day on the average. If two flies landed on a beer glass, he’d make a bet on which one would take off first. It was fascinating. For nineteen straight days he never won a single bet he made. By that time I was lending him any money I could come by, just to see how long the streak would last. On the twentieth day he began to win. For six hours and thirty-six minutes on the twentieth day he could not lose, no matter how stupid the bet. He made a bet with Ned the Bookie on a horse at Gulfstream that paid \$216.80. The horse was the kind of plug you’d normally clock with a sundial, but he won big, by more than eight lengths. Ned didn’t pay track odds, but Winky still cleaned up.”

“Okay, so luck runs in streaks,” Fallon admitted. “Everybody knows that.”

“Not streaks, exactly,” Dandy corrected him. “It’s more like cycles. And not very well de-

finer cycles . . . at least not for everybody. It took me a long time to figure it all out. I won't bore you with all the statistics I kept on Winky. But I can tell you, Winky has a very well defined cycle of luck. Forty-one days, nine hours, and sixteen minutes, followed by eight days, three hours, and seven minutes, then sixteen days, one hour, and twenty-eight minutes—then it repeats. Also, each cycle is incrementing in duration as each day passes. The ratio is about a minute a day for Winky in each cycle . . . the next time, the forty-one day cycle will gain about forty-one and a half minutes, the others will gain in proportion. The amount of luck time, unsnakebit time—I call it starstruck time—will decrease by the same amount."

"Sort of like biorhythms, huh?" On one level of consciousness Fallon considered whether the Manhattans were influencing his decision to accept all this without question.

"Not quite. . . . It's more like a body in space orbiting a sun. Think of the sun as luck. My theory is, most people are born with a very stable orbit, almost circular. As they come under risk in the world, their particular orbit begins to change, becoming more elliptical. Winky now has developed the orbit of

something like Halley's Comet."

"What do you mean by coming under risk?"

"Well, you come under risk almost every day. Crossing the street against the light, business decisions . . . any decision that will cost you something if you are wrong puts you at risk. It doesn't have to be anything as formal as an out and out wager. The stock market is a good example. You don't think that's gambling? Of course, it works the other way round, too. If Winky were to lay off the betting for any length of time, the trend would start to reverse itself."

Fallon waved to Rudy for another refill. "Let me get this straight," he said. "You mean you can figure out when I'm going to be lucky and unlucky?"

"I doubt it. It's not that easy with most people. The normal individual has a very short cycle, a matter of hours—very hard to measure accurately. To use the body-in-space analogy, the normal person's orbit would be egg-shaped. Never too close to the sun, but never very far away, either. Short periods of luck followed by short periods of bad luck. Winky is different. When he approaches his closest to starstruck, he is so lucky he somehow produces a force strong enough to influence the outcome of the bet. The same thing

happens when he is at the other extreme, but with the opposite result. He loses."

"You mean to tell me you made all your money betting? You waited until what's-his-face, Winky, was starstruck . . . er, struck; then you bet the same way he did?"

"Not entirely. I did when I could. Many times he'd go starstruck when it was impossible to get a bet down on anything. Since he was intensely snakebit most of the time, I found a way to bet against him. For example, one of the interesting things about the Snakebit Principle, it generally has a spinoff effect, enticing the bettor to more frenzied betting activity. Let me see if I can explain. I always staked Winky at the racetrack when he was deep snakebit. At least once during each of these periods, he would get all excited over the chances of a particular horse. Usually, though, he would change his mind before he made his bet. When that happened, it was the strongest kind of signal. Once he got off the horse to bet on something else, there was no way the animal he picked originally was going to lose. I have been known to bet as much as ten thousand dollars on Winky's discards. Gut-wrenching frustration seems to fuel the principle."

Rudy switched channels on the TV. Dandy again paused in his narrative to watch the tail end of a news bulletin on Channel Seven. The Soviet premier had issued a strong protest over the proposed launching of the Killer satellite. There was to be an additional statement issued from Moscow at any moment, which the newscaster promised would be broadcast later in the program, as soon as it was received.

Fallon got another drink from Rudy. He took the cherry from his new Manhattan and lined it up with the three others in the ashtray.

"Then there was Mrs. Dorkman, the left-handed lady crapshooter from Dundee, Iowa," Dandy told him.

Fallon, nursing his fourth Manhattan, noticed he was having trouble focusing on the IN GOD WE TRUST—ALL OTHERS PAY CASH sign stuck on the backbar. "A left-handed woman crapshooter?" he repeated.

"Yes. . . . It occurred to me—if my theory was correct about the snakebit-starstruck cycle, then it followed that someone who had never been very much at risk for a long period of time should be naturally starstruck starting out. Mrs. Dorkman was my trial case. She lived in a tiny village in Iowa, had never been outside the town before,

much less the state. She was sixty-eight years old. I met her in Las Vegas. She was recently widowed. Told me she was there to see the shows—she was crazy about celebrities. I gave her three hundred dollars to play the crap table. Told her she could keep the three hundred and anything she won.”

“You’re not serious?”

Dandy took a slug of his drink. “Yeah, I am. I put a couple of hundred on the pass line starting out. Then she rolled—and rolled—and rolled . . . she held the dice for an hour and fifty minutes before she crapped out. I had twenty across on all the numbers, fifty on the hard-ways. She threw numbers for almost two solid hours. Besides the three hundred she started with, she made another two hundred and thirty dollars. I made twenty-eight thousand. I don’t know if it made any difference that she was left-handed. But I figured there was no point in fooling with a good thing. I travelled through Kansas, Nebraska, the Dakotas, and Utah looking for left-handed candidates. I offered them an all-expense-paid trip to Vegas for two days, and five hundred to bet with. Mrs. Steinhoffer was the best. Big fat woman from a farm outside Provo. I kept pressing, and she rolled for almost three hours. I made a half

million before they shut the table down. ‘Course, everybody just called it beginner’s luck, but I knew what it really was. It never worked twice with the same woman, they were as snakebit as anybody the next time they tried.”

“This is a put-on, right?” Fallon asked, his words beginning to slur a little bit. “You expect me to believe you made eight million bucks betting with winos and left-handed fat women? . . . Gimme a break, Warren.”

“I know it’s hard to believe,” Dandy admitted. “And I didn’t make it all from betting. After the first million or so, I found a need for an accountant. He suggested tax shelters . . . and I don’t know . . . it just sort of grew. I don’t do the Vegas thing any more, but I still make an occasional bet when Winky cycles out, so to speak.”

Fallon motioned to Rudy for a refill. “You’re right about one thing,” he told Dandy. “I can’t print none of this. Even if it’s true. Who’s gonna believe it? Even as a human interest article . . .”

“But I haven’t told you the story yet,” Dandy revealed. “All I gave you up to now is background information.” Dandy rose from his place and motioned to Winky at the end of the bar. “Hey, Winky—come down here a minute.” He sat

down again and leaned over to whisper to his old classmate. "Don't leave nothing valuable on the bar."

Winky was slight of frame and short. He owned a long face composed of many sharp angles. His right eye blinked furiously. "Yeah, boss?"

Dandy withdrew a quarter from his pocket. He handed it to Winky. "Winky, I'll bet you a dollar you can't flip that coin and have it come up heads once in ten tries." He gave a sideways look at Fallon, who watched intensely, weaving slightly on his stool.

"You crazy, boss? Anybody can do that."

"Bet you a dollar you can't," Dandy said.

Winky studied the quarter suspiciously. It looked okay to him. He pulled a crumpled dollar bill out and laid it on the bar. "You got a bet." Dandy matched it, while Fallon watched with interest. Winky rubbed the coin on his sleeve and began flipping. Tails, tails, tails . . . ten times in a row.

"I'll be damned," said Fallon.

"Wait a minute, boss. Let me try it one more time," Winky pleaded.

"Okay, but it don't count," Dandy reminded him. The coin came down heads while Dandy was stuffing the two bucks in his pocket.

"Damn—I knew it," Winky shouted. "Let's try it again—double or nothin'."

"Maybe later," Dandy suggested. "I want to talk to Mr. Fallon for a minute." Winky departed, grumbling something unintelligible about dumb luck. Fallon waited until he was out of earshot before commenting on the demonstration.

"That was a genuine quarter?"

"Of course, here, look—damn, he snagged me for the quarter. . . . Anyway, there was nothing wrong with the quarter. Winky's just one day past being terminally snakebit. He was absolutely apexed out yesterday. Yesterday, if he had bet the sun would rise in the east, it wouldn't have. He was as snakebit as any one person could possibly get."

"You got another coin? I wanna try that."

"No, forget about it. I just wanted to show you some proof of what I was telling you. Because something happened yesterday. Winky made a bet . . . he—I better start at the beginning. I give Winky a couple of hundred a week to run errands or whatever. Mainly, it's to keep him around. We were in here yesterday afternoon. I was in the back room checking the tally for the week. Winky was at the bar tossing a few down. I planned on taking

him out to the track with me later. I knew he was terminally snakebit . . . figured on a few good bets. We'd been here maybe twenty minutes when the guy in the bedsheet walked in. Being as I was in the back room, I didn't see it. But Rudy had the shift, he told me what happened. The guy in the bedsheet was one of those nut cases you see walkin' the streets now and again. Big shaggy beard, sandals and dirty feet, long hair. He was carrying a sign. 'REPENT! THE WORLD ENDS JULY 31ST AT MIDNIGHT!'

"You don't mean to say . . . ah . . ." Fallon stammered.

Dandy nodded. "Yes . . . I'm afraid so. Bedsheet sits down, props his sign against the wall. He shouts out to Rudy for a fish sandwich and a glass of water. Winky yells at him from the bar—tells him his sign is a bunch of hooley. Naturally Bedsheet starts to argue. So Winky bets him a twenty that the world won't end tonight at midnight. Bedsheet takes the bet and slaps a twenty on the table. They give the bet to Rudy to hold. By the time I get outside, Bedsheet has fled and the bet is set. All the time Rudy is telling me about it, he's bustin' a gut laughin'. He says to me, 'How do you figure the bedsheet is going to collect his bet if the world comes to an end?' As you

might imagine, I didn't find it amusing."

"Today's the thirty-first." Fallon felt the need to emphasize it.

"I know. And Winky is so snakebit, I think maybe it could happen." They both shot a look at the clock on the backbar, which said the time was ten fifty-seven. At that particular moment, a special news bulletin blared out on the TV.

"The Soviet premier's statement has just been released to the western press," the announcer explained. "The essence of the statement dealt with what the premier called 'the reckless adventurism the United States is pursuing in its persistence concerning the launching of the Killer satellite scheduled for a six A.M. liftoff tomorrow.' The premier stated that if no word is received from our State Department before midnight tonight, cancelling the Killer launch, the Soviet Union would not be responsible for the consequences. Our science correspondent . . ."

This information was muted by the collective Manhattans coursing through Fallon's consciousness. But it did get through.

"It's happening," he said, staring fixedly at his string of maraschino cherries. He grabbed Dandy's arm. "There

must be something we can do—get Winky to call off the bet . . .”

Dandy sat shaking his head. “It’s already set in motion. It will either happen now, or it won’t.” He glanced at the clock. “We’ll know in an hour. Probably ought to get another drink while we can.”

“There must be something we can do.”

“Well,” Dandy responded, pushing his empty glass forward. “We can hope there is a multitude of starstruck, left-handed old women out there somewhere, praying for peace. They’re finally at risk with a lot to lose.”

Fallon nodded somberly.

“Or just to be on the safe side,” Dandy continued, “you can print Winky’s name in tomorrow’s paper—his real name, Elmo ‘Winky’ Burdett. You see, I bet Winky a hundred bucks his name would be in tomorrow’s newspaper.”

Fallon entrusted his old classmate with a puzzled frown.

“Don’t you see?” Dandy hastened to explain. “Winky can’t lose both bets. I mean . . . if the world ends, the newspaper won’t be printed, he’d win the bet. His

name would not appear.”

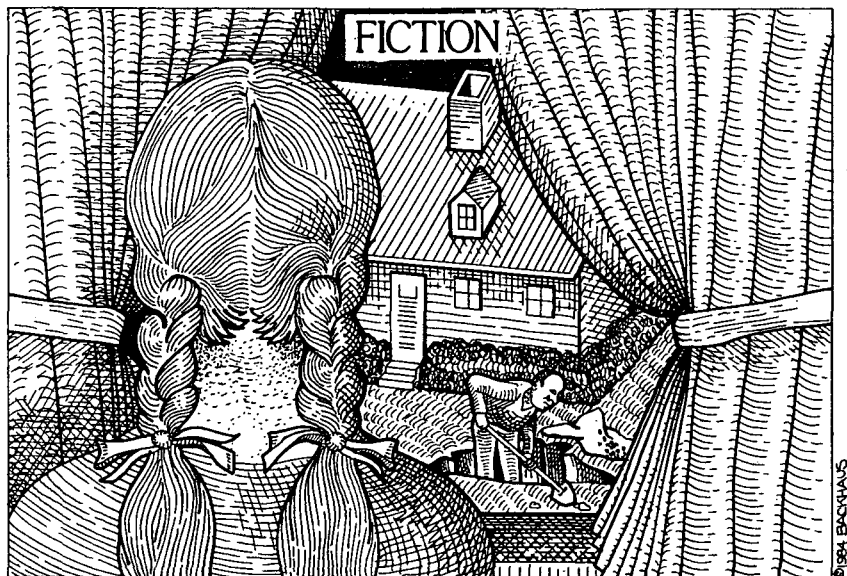
“I’m not sure I follow you.”

“Think about it. In order for him to lose the newspaper bet, the world cannot end tonight. On the other hand, in order for him to lose the bet with Bedsheet, the world must end tonight. We offer the fates a paradox—a paradox in which Winky must get the short end. That is, as snakebit as he is right now, he must win the cheaper of the two bets—the bet that repays the least. He wins Bedsheet’s twenty on the world bet, but he drops a hundred to me when his name appears in the newspaper. A net loss of eighty dollars on the two bets. Don’t you understand? It’s the only way.”

Fallon fumbled his notepad from his jacket pocket. “How do you spell Burnett?” he asked.

“Burdett,” Dandy corrected him. “B-u-r-d-e-t-t. And one thing more. His name must appear on the front page.”

Fallon slid drunkenly off his stool. “Nothing to it,” he boasted with the passionate arrogance of the soused journalist. “Commissioner Esteban Miraflores just became Elmo ‘Winky’ Burdett. You got a phone in here?”



No One Ever Listens

by Stephanie Kay Bendel

“**M**y name is Tracy Rogers and I want to report a murder,” I said carefully into the telephone.
 “Yes, ma’am.” The policeman’s voice sounded as though he believed me. I was afraid he wouldn’t. He asked for my address. “Now, tell me what happened.”

I took a deep breath. “My neighbor, Mr. Eddie Huggins, killed his wife and buried her under the rosebushes in his back yard.”

There was a long silence. “Miss Rogers, how old are you?”

“Eleven—and a half.”

“Oh! And did you see Mr. Huggins kill his wife?”

“No,” I said truthfully. “But I heard them arguing. And now she’s disappeared and he says she went to visit a sick sister. But he’s lying. And I *did* see him bury something!”

“Uh-huh. Okay, Miss Rogers, I’ll take care of this for you,” the policeman said.

Illustration by R.B. Backhaus

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But I heard him chuckle before the line went dead, and I knew he wasn't going to do anything at all. That was the worst thing about being eleven years old. No one ever listened to me.

So I had to figure out what to do about Eddie Huggins all by myself.

Although the Hugginses had lived next door for the past two years, I didn't know very much about them. They kept to themselves. Mrs. Huggins—her first name was Sharon—was tall and slim and had beautiful red hair that tumbled halfway down her back. She always wore tight jeans or short shorts and walked with a little wiggle. Heads turned when she passed. Even Daddy's. Mom once teasingly called him swivelneck, and his face got all red.

Mr. Huggins was older than his wife, and he had a bald head and a big belly. He always scowled, and he smelled of stale cigars if you got near him. I wondered why Sharon married him. As far as I could see, the only thing the Hugginses had in common was that they both hated Mrs. Bailey's cat.

Mrs. Bailey was the Hugginses' neighbor on the other side. A widow, she was cranky and hard of hearing and lived alone with her cat. He was a big orange tom named Merwin, and he often made a ruckus at night—usually from outside the Hugginses' bedroom window. They threw things at him, like shoes and magazines.

But a few weeks ago, Eddie peppered the cat with buckshot, and Mrs. Bailey took him to court. The judge said that Merwin was a public nuisance and Mrs. Bailey was supposed to keep him indoors at night. He also said Eddie had broken the law by firing a shotgun inside the city limits. Eddie had to pay a fine.

That left everybody unhappy. Mrs. Bailey said Eddie was an inhuman monster and begged the judge to lock him up. Eddie shouted—right there in court—that if he ever got his hands on Merwin, he'd kill him.

I think Merwin understood what happened. He still went wherever he pleased during the day, but I noticed that he always detoured around the Hugginses' yard.

Anyhow, my problem began around eight thirty last Wednesday evening. It was the first week of summer vacation, and I didn't have to worry about homework or early bedtimes. I was walking past the Hugginses' yellow ranch house on my way to the corner store for an ice cream cone. The evening was warm, and the Hugginses had their windows open.

"...don't know what in hell you think you're doing! I'm not letting you get away with this!" That was Eddie's voice.

"... don't give a damn what you think, Eddie!"

"... if I catch you sneaking out again..."

"*Don't touch me!* No, Eddie! Don't—" Sharon's voice sounded real funny just before it broke off.

Then there was a silence. I stopped and listened, but I couldn't hear anything.

I tried to imagine what was happening inside that house. Mom and Daddy fought sometimes. I'd be lying in bed and their angry voices would float up the stairwell. It might go on for a half hour at a time. But I knew Daddy would never *hurt* Mom. And eventually the angry voices would soften and I'd hear an occasional giggle from Mom and a low chuckle from Daddy. And if there was silence after that, I knew mushy things were going on.

But the silence in the Hugginses' house wasn't like that. It was a scary kind of quiet. I got so frightened that I forgot about the ice cream and ran home.

As I entered the house, my sister Mary Ann pounced on me. Mary Ann was fifteen and absolutely gorgeous. Trouble was, she knew it. Right now, her dark eyes were wide with anger. "*You!* You used my nail polish and didn't put the cap on tight! The whole bottle's gotten gummy!"

"Me?" I brushed my hair out of my eyes and stuck out my lower lip at her. "Does this look like I've been using your nail polish?" I held out my hands, showing her my ten bitten fingernails. Then I remembered that I *had* used her polish—to touch up the red paint on my bike. "Ooh, I'm sorry, Mare. I *did* use it. I'll buy you a new bottle tomorrow, right after breakfast. I promise!"

Mary Ann softened. "Well, if you promise! Be sure it's 'Frosted Apple.'" She disappeared into the living room, trailing a cloud of cologne and hair spray. I wondered whether I'd ever be as pretty as Mary Ann.

I forgot all about the Hugginses until the middle of the night, when I woke up without knowing why. I hadn't had a nightmare. My stomach didn't ache. I was lying in the dark, trying to figure out what had awakened me, when I heard a soft dull thud outside my open window. Then I heard it again.

My second story window overlooked the Hugginses' back yard. I pushed back the frilly pink curtains Mom had made for me. The moon was just a sliver in the sky, but I could make out Eddie's bulky figure. He was digging up his rosebushes.

I thought it was strange that he wasn't using a flashlight. Even if he had been, no one could have seen him except me. The back

of his yard was lined with tall arborvitae, and the windows of Mrs. Bailey's cottage looked upon a six-foot fence.

Eddie had already dug a big hole. I watched with my elbows on the windowsill and my chin cupped in my hands. He made the hole deeper and deeper until only the top of his bald head reflected the dim moonlight.

I was wondering how deep he was going to dig when he scrambled out of the hole and went into his house. A minute later, he reappeared, carrying something wrapped in a dark blanket. With a shiver, I realized that the something was large enough to be a person. It was heavy enough, too, because Eddie really struggled with it. He staggered across the yard. Then he dropped it—blanket and all—into the hole and began covering it with earth.

I had read enough detective stories to know what I was seeing. Eddie had killed Sharon and was burying her in his back yard. What other explanation could there be? I stayed at the window watching until he had reset the last rosebush in place and carefully tamped the earth around it. When he went back into his house, I padded down the hall to Mom and Daddy's room and knocked on the door. "Daddy! Mom! Wake up!"

Mom opened the door, her eyes puffy with sleep. She was pulling on her robe. "What's the matter, Tracy?"

"We've got to call the police! Mr. Huggins killed his wife and buried her in his back yard!"

Mom looked at me for a long moment. Then she looked back into the bedroom. "George!"

Daddy staggered sleepily down the hall to my room and looked out the window at the rosebushes in Eddie's yard. "Everything looks normal to me, Trace," he said. "I think you just had a dream."

"I wasn't dreaming!"

Mom yawned. "Sometimes dreams can seem very real. Better go back to bed, babe."

Mary Ann, globs of night cream on her face, stood in the doorway. "What's going on?"

"Nothing," Daddy said, running his fingers through his hair.

"Tracy just had a nightmare. She's going back to sleep now."

"But, Daddy?"

He tousled my hair. "Believe me, Trace. This will seem pretty funny in the morning."

And when I looked out the window again at eight thirty in the morning, I *did* wonder. There were four rosebushes in the Hugginses' yard. The earth around them looked black and fresh, but

they still looked as ordinary as ever. There was nothing to prove that I hadn't dreamed the whole thing.

At breakfast in the sunny kitchen, last night seemed even more unreal. Daddy was already dressed and finishing up his coffee before leaving for the office. Mom, in robe and slippers, poured a glass of orange juice for me. Mary Ann was toying with her eggs. Her hair was still rumpled from sleep, but her mascara and eyeliner were already carefully applied. She grinned at me as I sat down.

"Here she is! Tracy Rogers, girl, private eye!"

I glowered at her. "Go ahead and make fun of me! I *know* Eddie buried *something* last night! I saw him!" I sipped my juice, then added, "And I *still* think we should tell the police!"

Mom gave Daddy a funny look and he put down his coffee cup. "Trace, what happened last night was probably a dream. But if you *did* see Eddie bury something, I'll bet it was Mrs. Bailey's cat. She let it out again. I heard it yowling around one o'clock."

"It was a lot bigger than a cat," I insisted. But Daddy was draining the last of his coffee and didn't seem to hear.

Mom set a plate of eggs and toast in front of me. "Eat something, dear. You'll feel better."

"Daddy—"

"Sorry, Trace, I've got to run." He stood up and folded his napkin. "Don't worry. Your imagination's just working overtime. And for Pete's sake, *don't* say anything about this to *anybody*! Huggins'll sue us for slander or something."

He left and I felt deserted.

"You promised to buy me a new bottle of nail polish," Mary Ann reminded me.

On my way back from the corner store, with Mary Ann's polish in my hand, I kicked with discouragement at a stick on the sidewalk. It wasn't fair! If I were a grownup, they'd have listened! They'd probably even have taken Mary Ann seriously. But anything an eleven-year-old said wasn't worth listening to.

When I'd left the house, Mom had asked, "Where are you going?"

"To feed the tigers at the zoo."

"Well, be sure to be back by eleven. We're going to Aunt Vera's for lunch."

It was always like that. Nobody ever listened to a thing I said.

I kept thinking about Eddie. Was it possible I was wrong? Maybe he'd gotten rid of something else in the back yard last night. Maybe Sharon Huggins was perfectly all right. It would be nice to be sure.

I was nearly home when I got an idea. I trotted up the Hugginses'

front walk and rang the doorbell. After a moment, Eddie opened the door. His eyes were swollen, his chin was covered with dark stubble, and he smelled of stale cigars.

"Yeah?" he growled.

I held up the nail polish. "I brought this for Mrs. Huggins. My sister borrowed a bottle from her a couple of days ago."

Eddie grabbed the bottle. "Yeah, okay. I'll give it to her." He started to shut the door, but I pushed forward.

"Would—would you ask her if the color is all right? It's not quite the same as the one Mary Ann borrowed. If she doesn't like it, I can exchange it."

Eddie's eyes narrowed for a moment. "She isn't home right now."

"Oh! Well, I can talk to her later. When do you expect her?"

Eddie stared at his hands. His fingernails were dirty. "Actually, she's out of town. You see, she went to stay with her sister in Des Moines. The sister's real sick." He shrugged. "I don't know how long she'll be gone."

A little thrill ran up my spine. "I'm awfully sorry," I said quickly. "I hope her sister gets better."

A minute later, as I mounted the steps of my own home, I realized that Eddie had kept the polish.

"What are you doing?" Mary Ann demanded as I charged up to my room.

"Gotta get some more money for your polish."

"I thought you left to get it a half hour ago!"

"I did, but I lost it. Gotta buy another bottle."

Mary Ann moaned. "Honestly, Tracy! You haven't got a brain in your head!"

"Mrs. Huggins is gone!" I retorted. "Does *that* sound like I'm so dumb? I *told* you something's happened to her!"

"How do you know she's gone?"

I explained.

Mary Ann sniffed. "The only thing that proves is that you've been reading too many drugstore mysteries." She gave me one of her pity-my-little-sister looks. "*Tracy Rogers and the Case of the Planted Wife*," she teased. "How do you know she *hasn't* gone to Des Moines?"

She was right, of course. A good detective would check that out. Only I didn't know how.

All during the ride to Aunt Vera's house in Middleton and all through lunch, I thought about it.

"Goodness girl! You're so quiet today!" Aunt Vera, who was a

somewhat older and plumper version of Mom, clucked over me. "And you haven't eaten a thing! Don't you feel well?" She shoved a buttered muffin toward me.

I protested, but Mom cut in. "She's all right, Vera. She just didn't sleep well last night."

Aunt Vera turned to me. "Why don't you go upstairs and lie down while the rest of us visit?" she suggested.

I was glad to be alone. I flopped down on Aunt Vera's big soft bed and stared at the roses on the wallpaper.

If only I could be sure that Sharon wasn't in Des Moines. If I knew the name of Sharon's sister, I could call Des Moines and ask for Sharon. Then I'd know.

Of course, if Sharon *did* answer, it would be pretty embarrassing. What could I say?

I wouldn't have to say anything, I decided. If Sharon answered, I'd just hang up. But then there'd be the long-distance call to explain. And I couldn't very well call collect.

I stared at the pink Princess phone next to Aunt Vera's bed. There was a simpler way. I dialed long-distance information and, a moment later, the operator.

"I want to make a collect call to Riverside," I said. I gave her the number.

"And your name, please?"

"Sharon Huggins," I said sweetly.

"Hello." Eddie's gruff voice came on the line.

"I have a collect call for anyone from Sharon Huggins," the operator said. "Will you accept the charges?"

I heard a gasp at the other end of the line. There was a long silence. Then Eddie said, "Yeah, yeah. Sure."

"Go ahead, ma'am."

I didn't say anything.

"Hello! Hello?" Eddie's voice had changed. It was tight and strained.

"Who in hell is this?" he hissed.

I hung up. My heart was pounding. There couldn't be any mistake now! Eddie had known it wasn't Sharon calling from Des Moines or anywhere else!

"Who were you calling, dear?" Mom was standing in the doorway.

I got up and smoothed out the bedspread. "Dial-a-Prayer." I smiled. There were some advantages to being ignored all the time. "Are we leaving already?"

"I'm afraid so. We have to shop for a new outfit for Mary Ann

to wear to the youth dance on Saturday night. Do you feel any better?"

"Yeah, lots. Do I have to go shopping, too?"

"I don't suppose so. Just stay around home, all right?"

A half hour later, from my own front door, I watched Mom back the station wagon out of the driveway. As soon as it was down the street, I called the police.

But the police didn't listen to me, either.

The heck with it, I finally decided. If they won't listen to me, let them find out about Sharon's murder by themselves!

I went up to my room and sat by the window and stared into Eddie's back yard. Sooner or later, somebody'd report Sharon Huggins missing. And sooner or later, they'd dig up those rosebushes and then I'd laugh at all of them. *I told you so!*

As I watched, the back door of the Huggins house opened and Eddie came out into the yard. He inspected the rosebushes. He walked all around them and carefully poked at the soil with his toe. Then he stood with his hands on his hips and looked around. His bald head slowly turned from one side to the other.

Suddenly, he looked up at my window and saw me. His body stiffened. I sat frozen in horror, feeling like one of the little yellow ducks in the shooting gallery at the carnival.

He knew! He knew I saw him bury Sharon!

I pushed myself away from the window and scrambled downstairs. Mom and Mary Ann wouldn't be back for a couple of hours. Daddy would be even later. I locked the doors and began checking the windows.

What could I do? Eddie might come over and break into the house. He might kill me, too! There was nowhere I could go. No one was going to listen to me. And even if nothing happened before Mom and Mary Ann came home, I still wasn't safe. Eddie could wait. It might be tomorrow or even next week, but sooner or later, he'd catch me! And then—

I felt sick at my stomach as I closed the dining room window. Outside on the patio, Merwin was stalking an unsuspecting robin. I rapped on the window. The startled bird fluttered off and Merwin gave me a dirty look. The nasty thing! Picking on a helpless little bird. He was as bad as Eddie Huggins.

I stopped and stared at the cat through the glass. What if—?

Maybe there was a way to take care of Eddie after all!

With a little coaxing and an open can of tuna that I hoped Mom wouldn't miss, I managed to get Merwin into the house. I wasn't

any too soon. As I locked the patio dooor, I saw that Eddie was coming across his yard, heading for the front of our house. I locked Merwin in my bedroom and went downstairs to the phone.

"Mrs. Bailey?" I shouted into the mouthpiece. "This is Tracy Rogers. There's something you should know . . ."

Eddie was pounding on the front door. "Hey, kid! Open up! I want to talk to you!"

Then I started shaking. I couldn't stop. My knees got so trembly I had to sit down on the kitchen floor. Eddie kept pounding on the door until the police car pulled up.

A short while later, Mrs. Bailey, Eddie Huggins, two policemen, and I stood in Eddie's back yard.

"He killed my cat!" Mrs. Bailey shrieked. "The girl saw him! Says he buried it right there under those bushes!" She shook a bony fist at Eddie. "You'll pay for this! You wait!"

Eddie was a sickly white. "This is ridiculous!" he sputtered. "I never touched her damned cat!"

One of the officers looked at him. "But you did threaten to kill it. I heard you. In court." He turned to me. "Are you sure you saw him bury the cat?"

I nodded solemnly.

"Then, sir," the officer said to Eddie, "I'm afraid the only way to settle this is to dig. Do we have to get a court order?"

Eddie's shoulders slumped. He shook his head.

"He buried it real deep," I offered helpfully.

By suppertime, the news of Sharon Huggins's murder was all over town. Merwin had been returned to his bewildered owner. Mom had to be sedated.

"She saw the whole thing, George! And she's only a baby! My poor little girl!"

Mary Ann sat on the sofa in her new outfit, her eyes dripping with mascara. But no one paid any attention to her. Newspaper people and television reporters with cameras were crowding into the living room. A blonde lady held a microphone in front of me as I told my story.

I really enjoyed it.

They were all listening.

FICTION

A Death in the Rough

by Sherrard
Gray

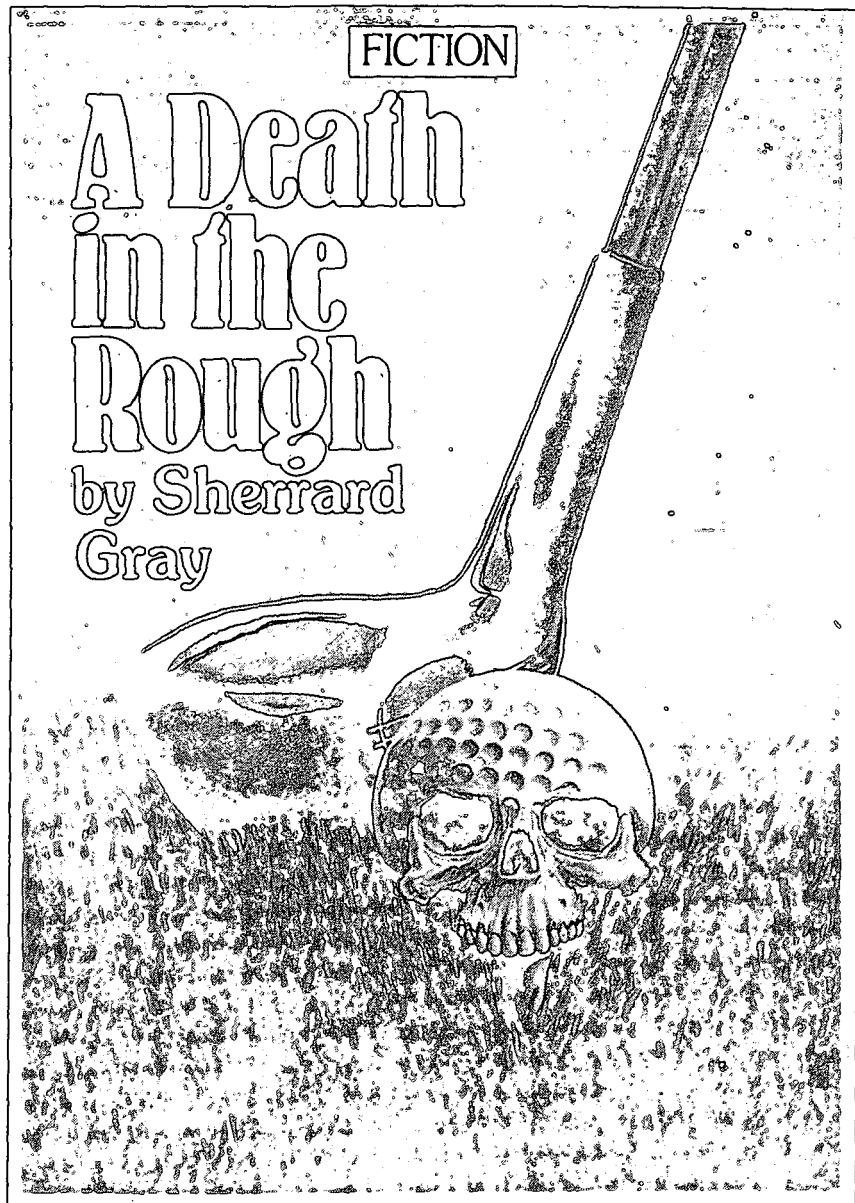


Illustration by Nick Jainshigg

My stomach hadn't rolled over at the sight of a corpse for years, but looking at Hal Capland's battered head on the second hole of the Twin Elms golf course did it to me. I had to slip behind a clump of cedars and lose my lunch. Off to one side a close friend of the victim's, Rachel Cassidy, sagged against a maple, staring vacantly at the ground. Capland's sister Lynn and Scott Harrington, the other two members of the foursome, had gone home. I made Rachel sit down on the ground and put her head between her knees.

Captain Swanson of the North Mills Police Department walked over with a long face. For my money Swanson was a bit too cautious and methodical, but he was a hardworking, conscientious cop, and he never showed any professional jealousy toward me, a semi-retired investigator who still liked to poke his nose into things.

"In Monks Corner?" he murmured.

Monks Corner, my home now for the past three years, is situated on scenic Lake Osgood with a year-around population of two hundred and fifty farmers and loggers; in the summer professionals and their families escaping the smog and clog of metropoli south of us swell the population to over a thousand.

Not many murders occur here, and when one does, say once every twenty years, it's usually a domestic quarrel resulting from too much booze, money, and leisure.

But Hal Capland's wife didn't kill him, because Capland wasn't married.

"Not in Monks Corner," said Swanson again. But it had happened in Monks Corner, on a sunny breezy day in July under a sky so blue it made your heart ache, and the fields carpeted with buttercups and Indian paintbrush.

"There's one thing about this that really puzzles me," I said. "It looks like the killer waited for Capland in the bushes here in the rough, but how did he know he would come this way? What if he'd hit his ball on the other side of the fairway?"

"You got me, Foxx. When it comes to golf, I couldn't tell a mashie from a six iron—or are they the same thing?"

Another strange thing about the case was that Capland had only made Monks Corner his summer home a month ago, hardly enough time to develop any enemies. He worked for the Environmental Protection Agency in Washington.

We tramped around the site a few minutes looking for the weapon, found none. The county sheriff and state's attorney ar-

rived, then the assistant medical examiner and the state's mobile crime lab, a large green van. The wooden hillside overlooking Lake Osgood was crawling with official personnel.

Rachel was on her feet again, answering questions in a daze, and I offered to take her home. On the way we passed Nappy Jones, a landscape architect from Hartford, sunning himself on his lawn with a sombrero on his head, his hairy torso plastered with oil. He gave a sour wave, obviously unaware of what had happened, but I saw him taking a second look at us. Probably noticed how grim we both were. Or maybe he was jealous: he had gone out with Rachel a few times and must have wondered what she was doing in my car.

I saw Rachel to her door, went back to Nappy's, and told him.

He blinked and sat up. His short, hirsute body glistened in the hot sun. The sombrero was tipped back a bit, showing a high forehead. Actually he was nearly bald, I had never seen him outside without a hat.

"One more time, Foxx. I want to make sure I heard you right."

"Hal Capland's lying in the rough on the second hole minus half his head. Clubbed to death."

"Unreal." He stood up, all

five and one-third muscular feet of him. "The real world hits Monks Corner with a bang. Who the hell would want to do that?"

"Good question. No one even knew him here except his own sister—and Rachel, of course. He only started coming here this summer. Pretty short time in which to make a mortal enemy."

Nappy gave me what I thought was a queer look, but I didn't think much about it until later. Frankly, I didn't like the guy much; he had a chip on his shoulder the size of a pulp log, and all that oily hair didn't exactly turn me on. Couldn't he do his sun-worshipping behind his house? But we live in a free country. I left him and drove over to Lynn's.

She opened the door and put her wet face against my chest; then stepped back, her whole body shaking. After a good solid cry on the sofa, she dried her cheeks with a handkerchief. In her large brown eyes I saw the grace and courage that was already at work helping her to face the loss of her brother.

"Who in Monks Corner could commit such a gruesome crime?" she asked over a cup of black coffee. "I know Hal wasn't perfect, but I can't imagine anyone hating him enough to kill him. Oh, Burton..." Her voice

broke, she got up and went to the window in the kitchen, and though I loved her, I sensed a grief so deep that I could not touch it. After a while she turned back to me.

"I want to know who did it," she whispered. "I want them punished."

A blue Camaro pulled into the drive, and Scott Harrington, still in his golf togs, got out.

Scott was a rangy guy in his mid-thirties with clear-rimmed glasses and widow's peak. Like many of the summer folks in Monks Corner, he worked for the federal government. He had been a colleague of Hal's at EPA. He took his job of monitoring air pollution seriously, too—once I lit a cigar in his presence and he put on quite a show, coughing and gagging, spluttering and waving his arms, until I stubbed the offending critter out.

We talked about Hal for a while, what a cheerful, considerate guy he was, how he had saved for ten years so he could afford his own summer home.

"It meant so much to him," said Lynn who had been left her house in Monks Corner when her husband died in a plane crash four years ago. "A chance to get away from D.C. for a while. To refresh himself."

A humorless chuckle from Scott. "There's another reason

Hal bought a home here. Our clubhouse is on the left side of the first tee."

"If that's a riddle," I told him, "I give up."

"He had the worst slice I've ever seen. He once broke a window at an exclusive club in Virginia."

Was that why the killer had been waiting for Hal in the rough on the second hole? But who knew about Hal's slice besides the three people who had played with him this afternoon? This had been his first game of golf in Monks Corner.

"Sometimes he'd hit the ball almost at a right angle," went on Scott. "He tried to correct it, took lessons, and I'm sure could have succeeded, but it just didn't mean that much to him. He was not a passionate golfer. He enjoyed dubbing around, like we did today, but it definitely was far down on his list of priorities."

"Is there anyone else up here besides the two of you and Rachel who knew about this slice?"

Lynn and Scott thought a minute. "What about Nappy?" asked Scott.

"I was wondering the same thing," said Lynn. "They knew each other twenty years ago when they were both students at the University of Chicago. Wait a minute, I remember Hal

telling about how he and Nappy did play golf back in Chicago, in Jackson Park I think it was, and a lightning storm came up and they dropped their clubs and skedaddled back to the clubhouse to wait out the storm. He mentioned that several times, could look back on it now as a joke. I also remember they both liked the same girl then, with the unforgettable name of Millicent Mole. Flaming red hair, smart as a tack, and chewed men up like a garbage disposal. Nappy was really gone on her, you know how he gets over women, but she discarded him and went with Hal for a year before moving on to greener pastures."

"The same thing that happened with Rachel," I said.

Lynn pursed her lips. "I guess you could say that. And in both cases the girl didn't really care about Nappy, went out with him a few times, maybe smiled at him once or twice, and he lost his head. In fact Rachel even told me, 'I don't really want to go out with Nappy—but who else is there up here?' Ever since I've known him, he's been a touchy, difficult person, but lately it's been worse. I hear his landscaping business outside Hartford has been going steadily downhill the past two years, and that hasn't helped matters."

"That's understandable," said Scott. "You've heard that story about the lady whose new home he was landscaping? It seems she changed her mind a couple of times about how a certain retaining wall should look, and he got furious, told his bulldozer operator to get off, jumped on himself, and knocked the wall flat. You can imagine that didn't boost his business."

There was a small gasp from Lynn; she sat up so abruptly she spilled her coffee. "You don't think Nappy...?"

"Impossible," said Scott.

Reggie Ellis was baling when I walked across his hayfield that bordered Twin Elms. A tongue of maples extended along the far edge of the field and into the second-hole rough. On a hunch that the murderer had escaped through those trees, crossing Thief Brook on the edge of the course and going to an old sugarhouse where he had left his car, I had followed that route, and found fresh footprints in the brook's muddy bank, and fresh tire tracks by the sugarhouse. A rutted but passable track ran from the sugarhouse to the main road.

Reggie shut off his tractor and waited for me to come up. Usually when he saw you, a wide grin would break across

his seamed face, showing a pair of shiny uppers and lowers, but this afternoon the grin had been shelved. He shook his head sadly as I rested a hand on the Ford 5000's huge tread.

"Gosh, I hate to see something like this happen in our town. Might's well go live in Burlington—or New York City. You and the police have any luck yet?"

"Maybe. Reggie, you were out raking hay yesterday when it happened. Did you see anyone cross that brook over there in the trees, headed for the old sugarhouse? I know it's a long shot, but I just thought. . . ."

The farmer shook his head, then glanced over at a young man throwing bales up to a woman on a pickup truck. "Chuck was mowing that piece over yonder that day; he might have seen something. There are times, let me tell you, when I think he's got eyes not only in the back of his head but all around it—like a bandana or something. He don't miss much." Reggie gave a sudden shrill whistle that almost took my left ear off, and motioned for his son to come over.

Chuck's first words were almost exactly the same as his father's. "Gosh, I hate to see a nasty killing like that take place in Monks Corner. Makes you wonder, don't it, Mr. Foxx?"

For some reason I got choked up then, I wasn't even sure why, but it had something to do with the dying off of older, slower ways, the ebbing of a culture. I asked Chuck if he'd seen anyone Friday afternoon, the day of the murder, in those woods.

"I seen Sparky, but that's all."

"Sparky?"

"A neighbor kid who fishes a lot around here. Saw him jump over the brook and head towards home."

"Are you sure it was Sparky?"

"Who else could it have been?"

Chuck chewed on a haystem a minute. "I didn't see his face or nothing. But he was wearing that blue American Breeding Service cap he always wears."

"How tall was this person?"

"Oh . . ." The young farmer held out a calloused hand a little over five feet off the ground.

"Thin? Fat? Medium?"

"Not exactly fat but he had heft to him. Stocky, I guess you'd call it."

"One more question, and then I'll let you both get back to work. I found some fresh tire tracks by the old sugarhouse. Do many folks drive in there?"

"You better believe it," said Reggie. "That's a favorite sparkin' place. Guess folks don't call it sparkin' nowadays, though, do they?"

Chuck rubbed his clean-shaven jaw and gazed at the sky with an affectionate be-nice-to-this-old-duffer look. "You might say they don't call it sparkin' anymore. Yeah, I'll bet one or two cars goes out there almost every night, and on the week-ends you might get twice that."

Sparky Fletcher wasn't home when I walked around the eighteen-wheeler loaded with pulp in front of the house trailer and knocked on a flimsy aluminum door. His father was just finishing the noon meal and was about to take his load down to the pulp mill in Ryegate.

"Spark's fishing. Over by the cemetery, I think." Mr. Fletcher's eyes widened as a sudden thought came to him. "You don't want to see him about that—that *thing* that happened yesterday on the golf course?"

I tried to assure Stan Fletcher that his son was not a suspect, that I just wanted to ask him a question or two.

Sparky was fishing the Henderson Brook below the town's main cemetery with a friend, wearing his blue ABS cap with a couple of dry flies hooked in back. There was a twelve-pack of Genesee and a coffee can of worms between them.

"Hi, fellows."

A long silence as the two boys stared at me. Sparky had a faint curl to his lip, his sullen eyes went up and down me. I knew a little about him, and he wasn't exactly a model youth. He had almost killed a good friend of Lynn's, passing her on the Lower Road to North Mills one rainy night at about eighty miles an hour and swerving in suddenly to avoid an oncoming vehicle. Lynn's friend had gone into the ditch and totaled her Rabbit. I knew he had served a couple of short sentences in jail for simple assault and drunken driving. I don't think he liked outsiders, or flatlanders as we're called in Monks Corner.

"Lo," said the other youth finally.

Sparky turned to his friend. "Hey, you know who you're talking to? That's a cop."

"Sorry," I said, "I forgot to wear my red tail and bring my pitchfork. Sparky, when you were fishing Friday afternoon by the golf course, did you notice anyone else in those woods?"

"Sorry, *sir*, but I ain't fished over there in two weeks. Brook's fished out. Nice talking to you—*sir*."

“Are you kidding?" said Rachel. "We can't do that, Burton! I mean that's

the craziest thing I've ever heard of in my life." But even while she said it, a smile formed on her lips and her eyes sparkled with the lure of adventure. We were standing beside the Twin Elms tennis courts, Rachel in a short tennis skirt that revealed a pair of legs I can only describe as stunning, while Lynn sat on a bench a few feet away catching her breath after a hard singles set. A minute ago Rachel's expression had been a lot different. I'd told her I was certain Nappy had killed Hal but that I couldn't prove it, and that cautious Chief Swanson wanted more evidence than just speculation before asking the judge in Ravensburg for a search warrant to Nappy's garage and house. If we'd gone in right away and taken a dirt sample from his tires, I'll bet it would have matched up with the dirt around Dantly's sugarhouse, but he'd been driving around for two weeks since then. The chances of a conclusive sample were slim.

Rachel looked at Lynn, her eyebrows raised in a question.

"Yes, he's explained his scheme to me," said Lynn, "and I agree with you, he's crazy. But I've given him permission to try it."

"So the four of us play golf," said Rachel, "and you and I keep making eyes at each other

and on the fifth hole we both hit our drives by the shelter, and then we, er, embrace behind it where Lynn can't see us but Nappy can, and pow! he's supposed to be so enamored of me that he flips his lid and comes after you, thus revealing that he killed Hal."

Lynn shook her head sadly on the bench. "You know, it sounds even worse the second time around. But if there's *any* chance it'll work, I'm all—" Her voice caught, she turned quickly away.

"It's a hunch," I said, "but I think it'll work. We all know he's an unbalanced character, and right now he's really close to the edge. Something like that ought to nudge him over."

There was one problem, though: I hadn't played golf in twenty years, and twenty years ago my game wasn't anything to write home about, lucky to break sixty. I'd be lucky to break one hundred now.

Swoosh!

That's what my drive on the first tee sounded like. A total whiff. I pretended it was a practice swing and took a couple more, but it didn't fool Nappy. I heard him chuckle and say, "Something tells me this is going to be a long afternoon."

I finished my extra "practice"

swings, addressed the ball smartly, knees slightly bent, left arm straight, Red Sox baseball cap at a rakish angle, and swung. *Thwunnk*. Improvement. At least I hit the thing, which dribbled down the fairway about eighty feet with a gash in it like a sour grin.

"You're getting there." Nappy strode by me in ice-cream pants and cleated shoes, and with a bored sigh spiked his tee. He took a couple of fluid half swings, stepped up to his ball, and sent it sailing toward the flag with a nice little hook at the tail end for roll.

I carded a ten on the first hole, and that included nudging the ball twice with my foot for a better lie when no one was looking. I watched him carefully on the second hole where Hal had died, and had the distinct impression he was tenser than usual. No wisecracks and he walked faster as if in a hurry to get through it, which was fine by me. I wanted to get through it, too, for Lynn's and Rachel's sakes.

On the next hole Rachel and I started getting really chummy. When Nappy walked up to the tee, we stood off to one side, having a lively conversation about Chinese cooking. You could have bottled the look he gave us and used it as a defoliant.

By the fourth hole she was laughing at almost everything I said, and giving me friendly cuffs on the shoulder. Lynn was taking it stoically, and Nappy was simmering. He was also getting downright nasty toward me. When I sliced a three-iron into a big white pine, he yelled:

"Nice going, Foxx! How many strokes does that make for you? Fifty?"

"Close. I'm going for an even hundred."

"Looks like it. And that's not counting all the times you've improved your lie when you thought no one was looking. I mean, what is this, a circus or a golf game?" To show his contempt, he whacked his own ball as hard as he could over the green into Reggie Ellis's hayfield and made no attempt to retrieve it.

We assembled on the fifth tee, with the green on the other side of a small brook, a feeder into the Thief. Halfway to the green on the left side was a pond with lily pads and bullfrogs. On the right side of the fairway was the wooden lean-to, used as a shelter in case of rain, where Rachel and I were to hit our drives and then do some conspicuous lovin', but it didn't quite work out that way. Rachel hit a perfect shot within twenty feet of the hut, and then

I stepped up and chopped one into the pond.

"Way to go, Nicklaus," said Nappy.

My second drive hit a boulder in front of the pond and careened off into a stand of cattails. Nappy clapped.

"I'll help you find it," said Rachel, and Nappy glared at her.

As I headed for my ball, he came up to Rachel and I overheard bits of conversation. "... dinner Saturday night?" "I can't ... other plans." "... Sunday then? ... What's going on?"

Then she was beside me, bumping against me. Nappy watched us out of the corner of his eye the whole time we searched for my ball. He really was gone on Rachel, in a slavish, weak manner.

"I can't believe now I ever went out with that creep," she said feeling around a cattail with her foot. "Biggest mistake of my life: two dates and he thought he owned me. I don't think we're going to find your ball, Burton. Shall we put our plan into action by that clump of alders? Boy, am I nervous."

We went to one side of the alders, she put a hand on my chest, her lean hip grazed my thigh. "He's watching us like a hawk," she murmured coming into my arms, her eyes closed.

It bothered me a little that I was enjoying myself, but not enough to make me stop. I slid a look past her silky brown hair and he was bug-eyed. He was walking toward us and trying to talk and all that came out was, "You ... you scumbag!"

"Hmmm. Is he coming?" asked Rachel thickly.

"Yeah. One more long kiss ought to do it." Her lips fastened on mine, and for a stupid moment I got carried away and closed my eyes, and almost had them permanently closed.

"Burton, look out!" cried Lynn, and instinctively I threw Rachel to the ground and covered her with my body. Something breezed over my head.

"You rotten womanizer!" he screamed, cocking the club for another swing, "I'll kill you, too."

I rolled into his legs, hearing metal slice the air, and he toppled over me. The club spiraled off into the cattails.

There wasn't much to it, after that. I had the guy by fifty pounds. He was strong and dangerous, but he was out of control, snarling, swinging wildly. After one especially wild roundhouse, he staggered off balance and I grabbed his arm, twisted it behind his back and forced him to the ground with my knee on his coccyx. He thrashed and swore and

screamed, beating his head against a soggy hummock, and then lay still, panting, spitting out bits of marsh grass.

“Nappy was a strange mixture.” I was with Lynn on her sundeck overlooking the lake where a pair of loons drifted on the sunset-pink water. There were still tight lines on her face from the loss of her brother, but for the first time since he’d died a month ago, she had flashed one of her sudden, radiant smiles that always made me a little bit happier just to be alive. “He was off his rocker with jealousy, but he could also be a very cool, calculating guy. The business of the blue hat, for instance. He’d played enough golf here to know that Sparky fished Thief Brook a lot, that they were the same build and height, and that the kid never went anywhere without his ABS cap. So Nappy bought himself one and wore it that day in order to be mistaken for Sparky just in case anyone happened to look over as he was going through the woods.” I didn’t mention the lead pipe the

police had found, directed by Nappy himself, buried in the streambank.

“Creepy.” Lynn wagged a finger at me from the railing at the other end of the porch. “I still don’t like the enthusiasm you showed in your method of getting him to reveal himself.”

“Give me a break, hon’. I’ll tell you something, Nappy didn’t come at me because I was hugging Rachel, he was mad because I’d cheated at golf. Because I hadn’t counted all those improved lies.”

“Sure. Sure. Come on, Burton, admit it: you weren’t exactly in pain when you were in her arms.”

“Eh?” I said, cupping a hand behind my ear. “You’re too far away, I can’t hear you. Come over here and sit on my lap.”

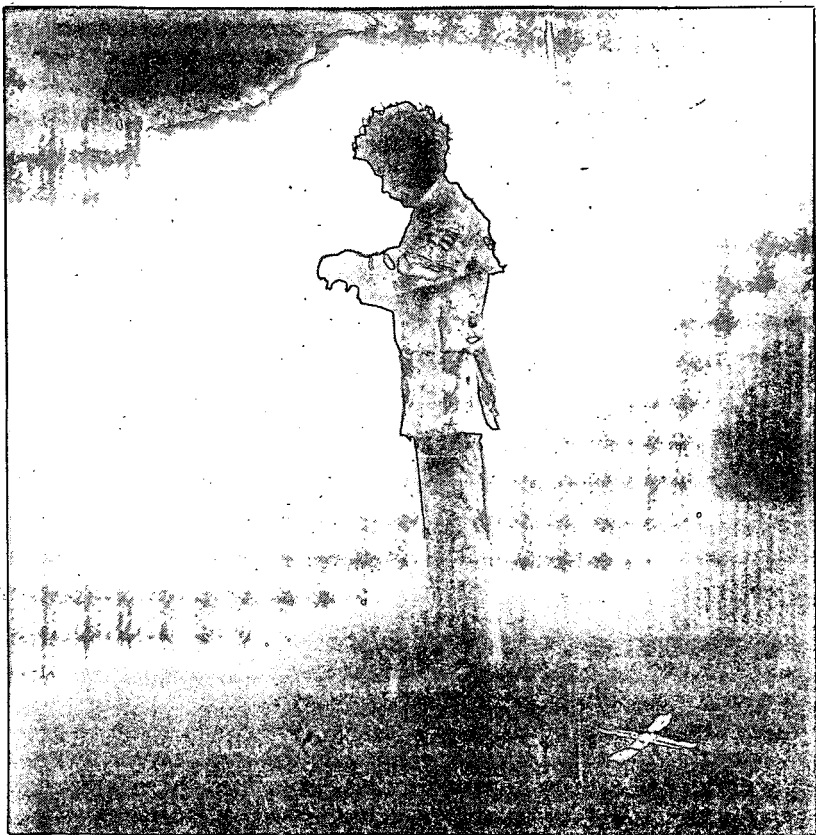
“Are you kidding!”

I looked at her sitting on the rail with the evening light on her high cheeks and proud forehead, and my heart went up one side of my chest and down the other, and started to do it all over again. “No,” I said.

She frowned, and then pushed off the rail and started toward me across the porch.

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

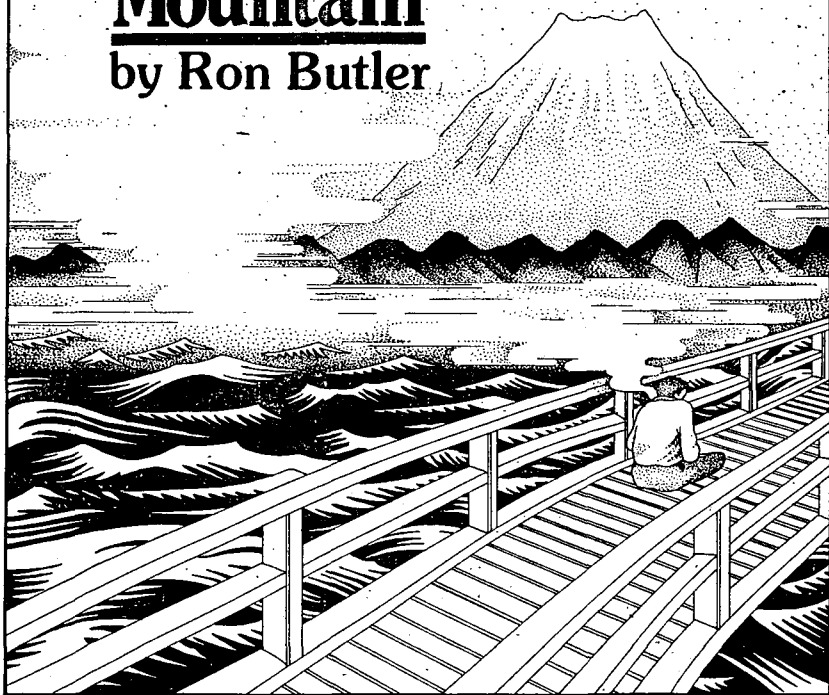
A trail of X's, a specific time . . . but what could he be up to? We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

By the Terrible Mountain

by Ron Butler



On a muggy July evening in the Year of the Rat, my old electric fan finally expired. I vowed to determine the cause and set it right.

"But," said Noriko, standing to one side of me on the tatami of our downstairs bedroom, "a new one will cost only a few thousand yen."

Illustration by Glenn Wolff

I glanced down into the eyes of my beautiful wife. "It's the principle of the thing, love. Save a little here, a little there—it all adds up. Ten to one says your father and I can have it working again in an hour."

Noriko put a finger to her lips and smiled. "Hai, husband. If you say so."

I picked up the black tele-

phone nested on a cushion by the bedding closet and dialed Okayama Police Inspector Toshihiko Ueki's home number. "Why not simply buy another fan, Sam?" my father-in-law said after I asked if he'd like to come over and lend a hand.

My thrift message was repeated. Ueki sighed, but he consented.

Within half an hour, his car pulled into the gravel lane by our house. I brought the fan into the family room and set it on the coffee table.

Ueki removed his jacket and sat down next to me on the sofa. We contemplated the defunct fan for several seconds. "Well," I said, "we might as well open the patient up and see what surgery's required."

"Tools," the inspector said. "Do you have the tools for the job, Sam?"

"Sure." I pulled a folding vinyl implement case from my hip pocket.

Ueki took the fan, checked the motor housing, and passed it to me. The back took a slot screwdriver, and the sides needed the variety named for Henry F. Phillips. I loosened the screws, and Ueki pried the metal covering off.

I eyeballed the interior and jabbed at the obvious cause of the problem—one of the wires leading from the switch was

dangling loose from its connection. "Almost too simple, right?" I commented as the inspector undertook his own examination.

"I would say so," he concurred. "If you will bring a soldering iron and the other requisites, this will be the work of only a few seconds."

Defeat, so close on the heels of success? "Ah, Toshihiko, that's something I haven't gotten around to buying. What'll we do?"

Inspector Ueki reassembled the housing and put the screws back in place. "Let me think, Sam. It seems to me that Esho Yamaguchi, the man who maintains our police equipment, should have everything we need. I will call his home and ask when he can spare us a moment."

There was no answer, so Ueki tried Police Headquarters on the theory that Yamaguchi might still be in his shop. He was, and after Ueki described the problem, Yamaguchi suggested that we bring the fan in.

"You may not return until after our sons are in bed," Noriko said as I fetched my coat from its perch on the kitchen chair, "so please look in on their bath and bid them good night."

"Hai," old Yumiko added, "and do not forget your house keys and money."

"Yumiko-san," I said cheerfully to the outspoken octogenarian who shared our home as resident nanny, "we're only going downtown and back, and my memory's clear as a bell." I dangled my keys and patted the wallet in my breast pocket for emphasis, then turned to the entranceway where Ueki was waiting.

"The boys?" Noriko said with a smile.

I backtracked to the bath and told Kenji and Jotaro I'd be right back.

"The fan?" Yumiko chortled as I started to step down into my street shoes.

I returned for it with strained dignity, avoiding Ueki's eyes.

"Do not feel bad, Sam," the inspector smiled as he started his car. "Men who are deep thinkers often overlook simple things."

"You've got that right," I grinned.

Ueki eased his car across the narrow bridge spanning the small river near our house. After he was on the main thoroughfare, I turned my attention to a determined green mosquito that was buzzing my ears.

Esho Yamaguchi welcomed us to the repair shop with bows and cups of green tea, which he placed in the only empty space on a littered workbench. "The

name of Sam Brent," he said after the ritual first sip, "is, I imagine, known to almost everyone in Okayama."

I beamed at the man with the jolly round face. "Always gives me a boost to hear that folks know about my computer hardware business."

"Oh," Yamaguchi said politely, "I think you are mostly known for being Inspector Ueki's son-in-law."

"About the fan," I said. "Sure it won't be imposing on you to patch it up?"

Yamaguchi expertly exposed the machine's innards and rectified the broken connection with the deft application of a soldering gun. "Please plug it in, Brent-san, and we will test it."

I turned the switch and the fan came to life, building up speed with its customary clack and rattle. "Perfect, Yamaguchi-san." I knew better than to offend him by offering to pay for his help, but did ask if he would meet Ueki and me for lunch someday.

Yamaguchi accepted as if he were the recipient of some magnificent honor, and Ueki suggested that we be on our way home. As we trod down the corridor leading to the parking lot exit, a cop I recognized emerged from an office, frowning at a report he was holding.

"Is something wrong, Sergeant Onuma?" Ueki said.

The officer looked up and sucked in his breath. "Yes, Inspector Ueki, and I am glad that you are here." He held out the papers in his hand. "Yoshio Suda was released from prison early today, and for some reason, we were not notified until just now."

Ueki grimaced and took the report, hurriedly reading over the rows of Japanese characters. "Assign as many men as necessary for guard duty, Sergeant Onuma, and I will leave for the prison early in the morning for some overdue inquiries."

The inspector turned to me. "Pardon me for a few minutes, Sam. I must call my superiors and make arrangements."

Not long afterward, we were driving past the garishly lit nightclubs of the entertainment district, the now-working fan on the back seat.

"What's the deal with this Suda fellow?" I asked. "How come the cops are so interested in his release?"

Before Inspector Ueki finished his account, I was interested, too. The story he told me concerned a convicted murderer who had been freed that day on the basis of a deathbed statement by his chief accuser.

Yoshio Suda (Ueki recounted) was arrested in Okayama in 1955 for the murder of his wife, following a lengthy investigation by the authorities. During repeated questioning, Suda never varied from his initial claim: he had found his wife strangled with the sash of her kimono when he came home from work late one night.

Suda, who owned a factory that turned out transistor radios, insisted that he had stayed at his office far past the closing hour in order to go over the books. His wife, Suda contended, died at the hands of an unknown assailant, for reasons he could not fathom.

The police could neither prove nor disprove Suda's version of his whereabouts, as all his employees had left at the usual quitting time. All the police had to go on was the autopsy: it established that Mrs. Suda died sometime in the early evening, perhaps five or six hours before Suda telephoned the police at one A.M. And this estimate, the police surgeon said, could be off by several hours one way or the other.

After a period of routine interrogation of friends and neighbors, the police told the prosecutor that there were rumors—no more than vague insinuations, really—of marital

infidelity on Mrs. Suda's part. Some people said that her husband devoted most of his time to the factory, and that Mrs. Suda, a vivacious and lovely woman, appeared to be increasingly bored with her lonely existence. Although no one could offer specifics, it was hinted that Mrs. Suda might have had an illicit relationship with another man, as there had been several recent occasions when she was seen leaving home dressed too smartly for mere shopping trips.

Having nothing more substantial than innuendo for motive, the prosecutor was reluctant to take Suda before a judge, and there was no progress in the case until the police called on another of Suda's friends, a business associate named Hisao Nakai. Nakai said that Suda had complained to him often that he suspected his wife of wanton behavior, and that, during a discussion over the telephone on the very afternoon of the slaying, Suda had indicated that he intended to end forever the mockery heaped on him by his wife, rejecting Nakai's plea to remain calm.

"Why, then," a lieutenant of police had asked, "did you not come forward immediately when you learned of Mrs. Suda's death?"

The policeman's report, filed

so long ago, recorded that Nakai had hesitated, apparently searching carefully for the right words. "I delayed," Nakai finally said, "because I only *think* that Suda killed his wife. I do not have proof, only his angry words."

The prosecutor at that point felt that Nakai's information, coupled with the time of death, provided adequate grounds for a charge of murder, a feeling that was reinforced by Suda's refusal to speak when he was asked the names of the man—or men—who might have been engaged in an affair with his wife.

"I did no wrong," Suda maintained when brought to trial. "Hisao Nakai lied when he said I made a threat against my wife." During the rest of the trial, Suda sat sullen and silent, disdaining to respond to any of the questions put to him by judge or prosecutor, showing no remorse for his wife's death, and offering no extenuating circumstances that might have mitigated the severity of the outcome.

After he was ordered to spend the remainder of his life in a cell, Suda was overheard to say, as he was led away, that someday, somehow, he would find a way to repay those who had brought him to ruin through what he damned as treachery and stupidity.

Now, as Ueki drove along the treelined boulevard that led past Okayama University, I asked the obvious question: why had Suda's freedom been restored?

Ueki took a pack of cigarettes from the top of the dash and pushed in the electric lighter. "Just before he died a few weeks ago, Nakai recanted his original accusation, confessing that he lied about Suda's threatening to kill his wife. He did so because he was convinced that Suda had cheated him in several business deals."

"Hell of a way to get even for being ripped off," I said, "sending a buddy away for life like that."

"There is more to the death-bed statement," Ueki said. "Nakai swore, in his last hours, that he had been with Suda throughout the day and night of the murder, putting together plans for increased parts purchases and higher productivity levels for the factory. In his confession, Nakai stressed that Suda's home life was exemplary, and that he had never heard Suda speak ill of his wife."

At this point, I was having difficulty trying to dogpaddle through the pounding surf of discrepancies. "Whoa, Toshihiko! Something doesn't jibe here. If Nakai was with Suda

at the time of the killing, why the heck didn't Suda say so when he had the chance? Seems like an airtight alibi to me."

Inspector Ueki flicked cigarette ashes out the window. "Sam, I do not believe we possess a fraction of the facts yet. Suda would not defend himself at his trial, and it was Nakai's statement concerning alleged adultery and Suda's supposed intention to end it that ultimately led to the conviction. And now Nakai has provided yet another account—one that caused the court to restore Suda's liberty. The officers who went to Nakai's home, at his request, to take down his admission had read all the material on file and had many questions, including where the two men were that night. Unfortunately, Nakai was already at the point of death, too weak to go beyond saying that they went to a restaurant together and left separately."

"Some mess, huh?" I commented as we turned into Tsushima District. "If Nakai was trying to ease a guilty conscience by coming clean before he died, that leaves me wondering why Suda didn't complain that he'd been framed. Also, if Suda didn't do away with his wife, who did?"

Ueki shifted into low gear to cross the bridge near my house.

"I do not know, Sam, but the identity of the murderer is only one of our worries at present. Remember, during the trial Suda claimed that lies had been told, and afterward he spoke of treachery and of avenging himself. Nakai, of course, is gone, but the judge and prosecutor who handled Suda's trial are still living. Until we know more, these people must be protected. Some of the answers, I hope, will be found at the prison among the people who knew Suda all these years."

"You know," I said as Ueki stopped in the lane by the house, "the computer system used at the prison you mentioned was sold by my company, and I think I just might be able to justify popping in to see how everything's going."

Ueki smiled. "Excellent! The monotony of travel is always lessened by the presence of a good friend. If you can manage to arise early enough, we will go together."

"Be up with the birdies," I promised. "By the way, what's Suda look like?"

Inspector Ueki turned on the dome light and handed me a picture taken at the prison. Suda appeared to be in his late fifties, and might have been a heart surgeon, a nuclear physicist, a truck driver, or a candy salesman.

"Mr. Joe Average," I remarked.

"That may be true as far as looks are concerned," Ueki said, "but what we cannot tell from that photograph is what Suda has on his mind."

I nodded, got out of the car, and waved good night, then went inside. "Noriko," I called out. "I'm home, and wait'll you hear where I'm going!"

That night was suffocatingly hot. Noriko prepared a snack of summer noodles, served over ice, and sat beside me at the kitchen table while I reviewed the situation with Yoshio Suda. "Your father," I said, "seems to be afraid that Suda is out to get the judge and prosecutor."

Noriko rested her head on my shoulder. "I always want you and Father to be careful, Sam, and especially at the prison. There must be many dangerous men there."

I kissed her cheek. "We'll be fine, love, and we won't forget to keep an eye out for the bad guys."

Yumiko, who was replacing a bottle of juice in the fridge, turned and humphed. "What you *did* forget, it seems, is that precious fan of yours. Can you remember where it is?"

The fan! How would I get through a stifling night without it? I summoned forth a casual smile. "Left it in Toshihiko's

car, Yumiko-san. He was in a hurry to get home, and I didn't want to hold him up."

Yumiko shut the refrigerator door, shook her head, and thumped up the stairs to her room.

"Never mind, husband," Noriko said. "I have opened all the windows, and we will have fresh breezes. You will sleep as well as ever and be refreshed for your journey with Father tomorrow."

Turning off the overhead fluorescent light in our room and snuggling next to Noriko on the lightweight futon, I doubted that I could find dreamland without the comforting whisper of air from the fan, and its familiar and lulling vibrations. Counting sheep never worked for me, so instead I counted and recounted the meager facts in the Suda affair until I yawned mightily with the effort and flopped over on my side. Someone died, someone lied, a man was tried. . . .

. . . and then it was morning.

"All set to go," I announced as I put a loose knot in my tie.

Yumiko inserted a folded handkerchief in my breast pocket. "Have you forgotten anything this time?" she said pleasantly.

I grinned, tapping various other pockets in my coat and trousers. "Money, keys, and alien registration papers. All I need."

"So," Yumiko responded, still amiably. "And did you remember to call your office and tell someone you will not be in today?"

"Ah . . . just getting ready to do that." I went to the telephone. Masahige Goto, my associate director, answered, and I advised him that I was headed out of Okayama with Inspector Ueki.

"*Doko e ikimasuka?*" Goto said.

"Where am I going? Believe it or not, Goto-san, I'm off to prison." When he showed no inclination to terminate the silence, I went on to explain that Ueki was going for an official inquiry and that I was making a courtesy call to see how our computer system was working out. "Of course," I added, "I'd really like to find out something about Japanese prisons. I've seen how the cops operate, and now I'm going to get some of the inside dope on what happens to the guys they collar. Anyway, will you please call the warden and let him know I'll be there?"

"Immediately," Goto said. "When will you return, Burentu-san?"

"Be in the office bright and early tomorrow. I'm not even taking a toothbrush."

Goto made a noncommittal sound and hung up.

Inspector Ueki pulled up to the house in a crunch of loose gravel and honked twice. I kissed Noriko, hugged the boys, and stepped down from the entranceway into my street shoes.

We arrived at Okayama Station with ample time for a cup of coffee, but Ueki wasn't in the best of moods. "Suda has not been located yet," he said, "and I have to assume he entered Okayama unnoticed. I am troubled about the safety of the judge and prosecutor, Sam, although my best men have been ordered to watch their homes."

"Have you warned them about Suda?"

"*Hai*, but both of them say they have lived too long to begin bowing to unfounded fears."

We got up and I passed over four hundred yen to the coffee shop cashier. Our eastbound bullet train came in precisely on schedule, and we stood back on the platform as hundreds of passengers disembarked and thronged toward the exits. Was one of them, I wondered, a man with a long-nurtured hatred in his heart?

We were in Tokyo by one P.M., merging with the ever-present

swarm of humanity to catch one of the local trains that circle the vast city. From a stop some twenty-four kilometers west of the Imperial Palace, we took a taxi the rest of the way, and soon I was looking at the high concrete walls of the prison.

There was a lone uniformed guard stationed in a glass booth outside the massive iron gate. He came out when we left the cab, scrutinizing us closely, and, although he carried no weapons, the man looked as if he could handle anything that came his way.

My father-in-law took out his identification and displayed it. "I am Inspector Toshihiko Ueki of the Okayama Police Department, and I believe I am expected by the warden."

"Yes," the guard said, eyes on me. "And who is this foreign gentleman with you?"

The guard was taken aback when I answered for myself—in Japanese. "Sam Brent's the name, and I'm expected, too. I want to inspect the computers my company installed."

"That is so," Ueki verified as I tried to convince myself that I hadn't deviated too far from the truth. "Mr. Brent is a friend, and I will vouch for his character."

"*Chotto matte, kudasai*," the guard said. Please wait a minute. He went to the telephone

in the booth and began speaking in the sharp, clipped words of a man addressing a superior, then wrote out entry passes. "You will be escorted," he said, using the telephone again to have us admitted.

As the gates swung inward with a ponderous groaning of metal, we were met by two hard-faced men—men whose bearing reflected rigid training and discipline. Their uniforms were blue, with short-sleeved summer shirts breaking at the elbow, black-belted trousers tucked into black boots, white gloves, and soft-billed caps reminiscent of those worn in the Japanese Imperial Army.

The two men took our passes, about-faced, and marched in step across a broad expanse of sward toward a long, one story concrete building separated from the prison proper. As we followed, we passed four prisoners in ordinary civilian clothing standing at attention before another guard, bowing in turn as their names were called, then lining up to be taken to some work detail. This guard, too, I observed, bore no weapons.

Outside the warden's office, another unarmed sentinel stood, feet slightly apart, hands behind his back. He took the passes from our escorts, knocked on the door after checking them,

and, with a nod, opened the door. We entered.

"Warden Takeshi Genba?" Ueki said.

The short, thin man behind the gray metal desk arose, bowing. "*Hai*. I do not intend to be abrupt or impolite, Inspector Ueki, but the Okayama Police Department has just informed me that Yoshio Suda was spotted in one of the city's bus stations several hours ago, and that he is being kept under constant surveillance until your return."

Ueki, with a look of relief, thanked the warden and introduced me. "The real reason Sam is here," he said with a smile, "has less to do with computers than with a large curiosity about our prisons."

Genba pressed his palms flat on the desk top and regarded me at length. "I appreciate your interest. We have no secrets here, and I would even suggest that you talk to some of the inmates for a more complete understanding. While Inspector Ueki reads our files on Suda, I will personally conduct you through our facilities, Brentsan."

The warden showed the way to the documents room. And then he took me into the realm of the condemned.

"Awed," I said in reply to

Warden Genba's query as to how I felt about what I'd seen. "Totally awed."

We were seated in Genba's office after the tour, which had included a brief but satisfactory look at the computers. It was a major effort for me to reconcile what I knew about convict life in my own country with the Japanese approach to legal punishment.

Japanese prisoners, I had found, were all treated equally. There were no special privileges, no extra fillips or considerations related to status or wealth, no tennis courts, hot tubs, private rooms with television, and, emphatically, no drugs or alcohol.

Conditions for everyone, regardless of the particular crime, were what I had to call harsh: dank cells unheated in winter and without air conditioning. The staple diet was built around fish, seaweed, and rice, and television cameras mounted on the cell walls followed every move of the inmates. And, with the exception of the aged, the infirm, or the handicapped, everyone worked. Warden Genba told me that each convict spent up to forty-four hours a week producing everything from chopsticks to paper sacks and tea bags.

There were other major differences, too. I was informed

that prison guards, who are required to undertake extensive training, are seldom armed, and that most prison officials are university graduates. Escape attempts are relatively rare, and the last prison disturbance occurred in the 1950's. No Japanese guards have been killed by prisoners, and during the past ten years, only one convict has been slain by another.

Maybe—just maybe, I mused—the Japanese perspective on dealing with criminals could be summed up by what I took to be the principal attitude of the people in charge: if you're here, we do not care who you are or how much money you have, only that you are no longer entitled to call yourself a free citizen. Behind these walls, you are criminals, sent to learn the consequences of your actions. You will work and show respect, and if you are intelligent, you will also reflect on what you gave up by breaking our laws.

One of the impressive aspects of the system, I thought as Genba poured more black tea, was that it functioned without physical force: for a Japanese guard to strike a prisoner without the utmost provocation meant a mandatory prison sentence of seven years for the guard.

The two inmates I'd talked to

had put their experiences in almost the same words: they weren't mistreated, but one stay was enough.

"What about backsliding?" I asked, stirring my tea.

Warden Genba smiled. "Ah, you refer to recidivism. Well, we do have a few people who seem to learn nothing here, but the police know who they are and watch them closely once their terms are up."

Okay, I concluded, if a system works—it works. I might have mulled it over longer, but Ueki came back to the warden's office then, carrying a thick sheaf of papers under one arm. "Genba-san," the inspector said, "I have all the personnel data on Yoshio Suda, but they are only marginally helpful. Do you have time to give me the benefit of your memory?"

"I am pleased to offer my services," Genba said, "but all I can tell you is that Suda kept his thoughts to himself, seldom speaking to anyone. One man who may be of some assistance, however, is our censor, who has been here almost as long as Suda was. He has spoken to me often of the strange letters Suda received."

"What was the nature of these communications?" Ueki asked.

"Without exception," Warden Genba said, "the letters were from the man who was in-

strumental in sending Suda here—Hisao Nakai."

"Let us meet with this prison censor without delay," Ueki said. "It is late, and I do not wish to be absent from Okayama any longer than necessary as long as the judge and prosecutor may be in danger."

I glanced out a window and saw leaden masses of thunderheads sweeping down from the north. A summer storm appeared to be in the making.

Inspector Ueki smacked a fist against his thigh. "Of all the inopportune times . . . !"

I couldn't fault his irritation. Aboard the last westbound bullet train of the night, we had traveled without a hitch as far as Nagoya. Then, while Ueki was in the middle of a call to police headquarters in Okayama, the jolt of one of Japan's frequent earthquakes automatically cut power to our train, and we crawled to a stop in an isolated stretch of dark countryside. Telephone service was disrupted at the point of conversation when Ueki learned that Suda had eluded the men following him.

As a final twist to obstructing fate, the summer storm I had predicted earlier had turned into a major weather front now drenching a large area of Honshu. We were notified over the

onboard public address system that there would be additional delays while night emergency crews went over the tracks looking for damage due to mudslides.

With the restaurant and snack bar closed, all we could do was stay put and hash over the information provided by the man who checked all incoming and outgoing convict mail. The first few of the letters in question, as the censor remembered them, were remonstrations by Nakai, reminding Suda that he had brought his plight upon himself by a murderous deed, reaping a just sentence that he might have escaped were it not for Nakai's determination to see justice done.

Through the years, however, there was a radical change in the tone and content of the letters. Nakai began to side with Suda, gradually leaving rebukes behind and moving on to sympathy, holding that the blame lay with Mrs. Suda, not Yoshio. Time and again, the censor said, Nakai elaborated on the theme that no husband should be scourged by the courts for what happens when an unworthy wife seduces another man with ancient wiles.

The censor remembered especially one recurring phrase in Nakai's letters during the last years of Suda's incarceration:

"We suffer, all of us, for what we have done."

Inspector Ueki had asked the censor how Suda replied.

"That," said the censor, "will always puzzle me. Yoshio Suda never once answered Nakai-san's mail, nor did he write to anyone else all the time he was confined here."

As the rain beat against the cars of our motionless train, I pondered the enigma: the simplest explanation was that Hisao Nakai shared with Suda some of the old traditional values that once went with marriage, one of them being that a man had the unquestionable authority to inflict extreme punishment on an adulterous wife.

But . . . that explanation wasn't adequate. If Nakai and Suda both believed that marriage included certain male rights, why had Nakai turned against his friend and accused him? And why didn't Suda write back?

"Damned odd," I declared, watching a railroad worker outside the window as he walked along in the rain with a flashlight. "The only thing I can come up with, Toshihiko, is that Nakai's conscience was getting to him. He was feeling rotten about giving evidence that was so damaging and tried to make up for it in the letters."

"Guilt," the inspector con-

ceded, "may prove to be the motive for both Nakai's letters and his dying claim that Suda was innocent—the victim of Nakai's reprisal for unethical business dealings. Yet I still have the impression that other factors are involved here, ones that are hidden from us."

"Yeah, maybe," I said. "Anyway, think the trip was worth it? All you really got was what the censor had to say."

Ueki stood up and took his jacket from the overhead rack, searching the pockets until he found an unopened pack of cigarettes. "The visit was productive in one sense, Sam," he said. "Suda's unbroken silence indicates a brooding mind, one that might be bent on violent revenge."

"Right. He also shook the guys following him, and that says a lot to me."

Ueki puffed on his cigarette. "That, as far as I can tell, is an accurate analysis. By the very act of avoiding police scrutiny, Suda seems to be preparing for . . . something."

Hours later, while we were making guesses as to what the future might hold, our train started up and Ueki went to the telephone for the third or fourth time, standing by until service was restored. He got through to headquarters and came back to our car with word that Yoshio

Suda's whereabouts remained unknown.

After I called Noriko to tell her not to worry about our delay, we reclined the seats and tried to rest, but both of us were awake when we pulled into Okayama Station shortly before daybreak.

Yumiko was standing in front of the house, chatting with the milkman, when Ueki let me out of the car. "You have overlooked the fan again," she said as he drove off.

"I've been up all night, I'm hot, and I've got to get a rush on to make it to the office," I retorted. "The fan can wait."

"He forgets things," she confided to the milkman, who was busily removing bottles from the wire baskets on either side of his bicycle.

The deliveryman, a retired high school math teacher who often came to our home to practice English conversation, refrained from comment but flashed a sympathetic grin in my direction.

Noriko gave me a royal greeting and put on a gangbuster western breakfast while I bathed and shaved. "I wish you and Father could sleep today," she said as I got ready for the drive to work.

That kind of concern always

pleases me. "Don't worry, love. I'm fresh as a daisy, and I'm sure Toshihiko's used to going without a full night's shut-eye now and then. If I hear anything about Yoshio Suda, I'll let you know right away."

Noriko gazed up at me lovingly. "Thank you, Sam, and please come home early if you can."

I got into our canary yellow car, revved it up, and, for once, made almost all the green lights, showing up at the office seconds after the habitually early Masahige Goto arrived. We spent a few minutes discussing the events related to Suda, then went over the day's agenda. There were a few contracts to be signed later and the monthly sales reports to be put into graph form for comparative purposes—nothing pressing.

Goto left for his own office with a stack of papers, and I stared at the telephone, debating whether I should call Inspector Ueki, find out what steps the cops were taking to locate Suda. No, I decided, rubbing tired eyes. Police work, like everything else, took time. I closed the office door and stretched out on the sofa. Sure as taxes, Ueki would call if anything came up. Meanwhile, forty winks wouldn't hurt anything, wouldn't be noticed, wouldn't...

Some people bounce from sleep to waking with instant alertness, aware and ready. Not Sam Brent. My sensory systems come on line slowly, and then it takes a while longer for everything to link up in a meaningful way. That day of the long snooze was no exception. The first thing that filtered through to the conscious level was that the Venetian blinds were flapping away. But something was missing—other sounds, like the ringing of telephones, the buzzing of intercoms, the normal background of conversation from clerks and secretaries.

I opened my eyes, blinked, and sat up stiffly, realizing with a hot blush that I was all by my lonesome in the office. Goto and the others must have done a lot of tiptoeing and smothering of chuckles to keep Brent-san slumbering in peace, and I could imagine the grins as they stole away silently at the end of work.

Guiltily, I went to the telephone at my desk and told Noriko that I'd be home for dinner as soon as traffic allowed. I was putting my jacket on when Inspector Ueki walked in.

"I am happy that you are still here, Sam. This has been a hectic day, and I regret that I did not have time to stay in touch."

"Way it goes," I said. "The

day really sped by me, too. So, what's up with Suda? Got a lead on him yet?"

Ueki plopped down tiredly on the sofa I had just vacated. "Almost as soon as I got to headquarters this morning, the judge and prosecutor came to see me. They thought I would be pleased to hear that they had decided to leave immediately with their wives to spend a few days at a festival, allowing me to release my men for other duties."

That sounded encouraging to me. "Why the long face, To-shihiko? With them out of harm's way, some of the urgency is gone."

The inspector put his feet up on the coffee table. "If anything, Sam, the situation is much more critical. Yoshio Suda is still following them."

"How do you know?"

Ueki explained. Suda, with the instincts developed by long-term convicts, was aware that his steps were being dogged by plainclothesmen. He ditched them by the simple expedient of hopping a crowded trolley, bulling his way to the rear, and getting off at the next stop. It was a move that caught Ueki's men off balance. By the time they got off the trolley and rushed back to the stop, Suda had vanished.

Once he assigned extra men

to the search, Ueki said, he began to speculate on what Suda would do for money, as he could not have had more than a few thousand yen in his pockets after his trip from the prison. Ueki started calling on the Okayama banks and discovered that one Yoshio Suda had, in fact, closed out a savings account that had been untouched since his sentence began. The sum in the account was a respectable one, enough to finance whatever plans he had.

Then, in the afternoon after the judge and prosecutor departed with their wives, a ticket clerk at Okayama Station told a detective that, yes, he did recognize the person in the prison photograph. The clerk said he remembered the man because he seemed unfamiliar with the routes covered by the modern system of bullet trains. His final destination was Osorezan, in the center of the Shimokita Peninsula in northeastern Honshu.

"And that," the inspector concluded, rising from the sofa, "is where the judge and prosecutor went for the festival."

Outside the window, the din of early evening traffic was picking up, and my stomach was making demands for sustenance. "How did Suda find out? You said the cops were watching them carefully."

Ueki raised the blinds, looking down into the crush of vehicles as he gave his account. He began with the hypothesis that Suda had to be operating under two assumptions: one, that the police wanted him for questioning because of his oath of vengeance after the trial, and, two, that security measures undoubtedly had been taken.

Accordingly, Suda then made another simple, direct move: he called both homes and was rewarded for his boldness when the prosecutor's elder sister, who lived with him, answered. This sister, who had decided not to take in the festival, said that Suda had seemed almost cheerful about giving his name, and identified himself as one of her brother's old friends. Knowing nothing of police fears concerning Suda's intentions, the sister disclosed where her brother and the judge had gone.

This news, Ueki conjectured, must have pleased Suda. In Okayama, the police restricted his opportunities. But at the festival, distant from major cities, it was doubtful that prefecture officials could adequately cover all of the towns and villages with tourist facilities. The changes wrought by time would mask Suda's face from his quarry, and he could stalk them at his leisure.

Suda had made one comment before breaking the connection: "They can avoid me no longer."

"Not good," I said. "Not good at all. But can't you get word to the cops near Osorezan and have them head off the judge and prosecutor, send them back to Okayama where you can protect them?"

Ueki leaned against a file cabinet. "I have asked them to do so, Sam, but I would feel infinitely better if I were there in person. All the individuals involved are from Okayama, I am familiar with the background, and it may take the authorities around Osorezan many hours simply to learn where our unsuspecting citizens might choose to stay, once they are there. That will delay the warning they need so urgently."

Ueki said that Suda left Okayama several hours behind the judge and prosecutor, and would not be in the Osorezan area until well past midnight. By then, the inspector said, he hoped the judge and prosecutor would be safely out of sight in one of the numerous inns and hotels. "But," he added, "hoping may not be enough."

"What's holding you back?" I asked. "The trains are still running."

"Yes," Ueki said, "but at this hour I would not be able to make all the necessary connec-

tions. I thought about driving, Sam, but I am in the grip of fatigue and do not wish to endanger the lives of other motorists. The best I can do is wait until morning and go by airplane."

An alternative requiring a confession presented itself. "Know what I did all day, Toshihiko? I slept, that's what, right here on the sofa. So there's no reason I can't do some night driving as your chauffeur. Goto can run the store while I'm gone."

The fatigue seemed to evaporate from Ueki's face. "This is one favor that I will find it hard to repay you for, Sam. Now, we can allow ourselves a few minutes to stop by our homes, but not too long."

If we drove steadily at the legal speed limit, Ueki said, we would be at the festival site early the next morning and he could work with the prefecture police.

"Consider it done," I said, closing windows and turning off lights. "As long as we're going to be there, you might as well tell me the name of the festival."

"*Osorezan Dai-Matsuri*," he replied. "Or, in English, the Great Festival of the Terrible Mountain. But there is another name for that place, Sam—one used by many who travel there."

"Yeah?" I tested the lock on the outer door and moved to the elevators. "What's that?"

"The country of the dead."

There was nothing pleasant about Inspector Ueki's smile when he said it.

On the road, and on my own! The inspector was slumped down on the passenger side of my car, head back, snoring lightly, as I ventured forth into my first go at nocturnal driving in Japan. For the most part, I'm nervous about motoring anywhere or anytime in this part of the world: the roads and highways are narrow by home standards, the numerous stretches of mountain passages and tunnels demand more than a little extra alertness for those accustomed to the wide and the straight, and the panorama of Oriental countryside can be dangerously distracting.

On this July night, however, a hundred kilometers out of Okayama, I had the asphalt almost entirely to myself. The inspector had gone over a map in red marker pen, carefully designating the routes, there was a penlight clipped to my pocket, and the gas tank was full. To complete my sense of satisfaction, there was the recent pleasantness of a splendid quick dinner put together by Noriko

and my parting remarks to Yumiko.

"Didn't overlook a thing," I had boasted as Ueki and I put our overnighters in the car. "The fan is right there on the back seat. Transferred it from Toshihiko's buggy to mine in case we have to stay at some hot, stuffy inn."

That seemed to satisfy her, and she went as far as allying herself with Noriko in urging us to be careful.

For a while after we left, the inspector chatted about the case. Judge Mimao Kai and the prosecutor, Tadayoshi Kunishio, were retired, he said, but they were among the most highly admired people in Okayama Prefecture.

As Ueki outlined some of the differences between the Japanese and American legal systems, I could appreciate his praise. Japanese who are charged with crimes do not present their stories to a jury; they must answer to a judge and prosecutor, and the final decision rests solely with the judge. Yet as Ueki told it, the Japanese people would rather place judgment of innocence or guilt in the hands of respected and trusted individuals whose reputations for honesty and fairness were known than with fellow citizens who were strangers.

The conclusion I drew from what he said was the same I arrived at after seeing the prison—if a system works, it works.

Now, hours later, twin cones of light picking out the roadway ahead, I fervently hoped I would get Ueki to the Terrible Mountain before Suda had time to ferret out his prey and strike.

The country of the dead, Ueki had called the place.

I cleared my mind of everything but driving.

A yellowish haze hung in the morning air when we arrived at the town of Tanabu, near Osorezan, and the sun was already burning with a white glare minutes after it cleared the mountain peaks. Even at that early hour, tourists and pilgrims were everywhere in evidence, and when we selected a *ryokan* at random, we were gratified to find that there was still room at the inn.

Inspector Ueki suggested that I sleep: he intended to meet with his police counterparts in the prefecture immediately to see whether Suda or the judge and prosecutor had turned up yet. I postponed rest for a physical need that took precedence at the moment—food.

"Very well," Ueki said. "You do not object to my taking your car for a while?"

"Shoot, no," I grinned. "You probably drive almost as well as I do."

The inspector shook his head and stepped out of our room. I upended my travel bag on the tatami, rooted around for razor, shaving cream, and lotion, and squeezed my feet into slippers several sizes too small for the walk to the communal bath. A leisurely soap-ladle-soak, followed by a shave, left me more famished than before, and after changing into clean clothes I sauntered up to the front desk and asked if I could have a breakfast tray sent to my room.

"Ma . . ." said the man behind the desk, and the politely imprecise word that can mean "well," "dear me," or "oh!" took on instant precision: I was too late for the morning meal.

Well, if the kitchen was closed here, should I hike down the road, look for an eatery catering to tourists? No, better not. Ueki could be back any minute, and I didn't want to be left in the dark about the Suda case or stranded if he had to journey out to the boondocks. What to do?

"Mr. Brent?" someone said from behind me. "Mr. Sam Brent of Okayama?"

I turned to check out the source. The two men standing at a respectful distance were at least a foot shorter than I am:

one sported a maroon beret over a lined, cheerful face, and the other's visage was decorated with white mustaches that curved downward over the corners of his mouth, where they merged with a fall of beard from the chin. "Yep, I'm Sam Brent, but you seem to have the advantage."

"Ha! I told you it was he," Whiskers said to Beret, then bowed to me. "I am Mimao Kai and this is my very good friend, Tadayoshi Kunishio. Like you, we are natives of Okayama City, and I was positive that I recognized you from the many newspaper stories dealing with your business success and your association with Inspector Toshihiko Ueki."

"Kai-san! Kunishio-san! Then . . . you've got to be Judge Kai and Prosecutor Kunishio!"

"That is so," Kunishio laughed, "but surely our fame does not equal yours. Now *you* are the one with the advantage. How is it that you know who we are?"

I told them, winding up with the safe bet that Ueki was going to breathe a lot easier now. "I'll bet the police have been looking everywhere for you."

"Oh," said Prosecutor Kunishio, "we have caused much trouble. We spent the night with friends at a nearby town

and checked into this inn only thirty minutes ago."

"Well," I said, "everything has worked out okay. Toshihiko's bound to be back soon, and I'll stick with you, if you don't mind, to see that Suda doesn't try anything."

Judge Kai worried his whiskers with thumb and forefinger. "That is so kind of you, Brent-san, but I doubt that Suda would bother with two old men like us. Nevertheless, we would enjoy your company and would like to ask you to be our guest at the breakfast which all of us seem to have missed. There is, I understand, a good restaurant within walking distance."

I smiled acceptance. Getting something to eat and being able to keep an eye on Kunishio and Kai would be a bird in each hand. I left a message for Ueki with the desk clerk, and my two new acquaintances went to see if their spouses were ready to go.

As I stood admiring an early Chinese watercolor on the wall, Kai and Kunishio came running back to me.

"Our wives!" Kai stammered, out of breath. "They are not in our rooms!"

"We do not know where they are!" Kunishio said in tones of desperation. "Could this Suda have abducted them as . . . as hostages?"

Pangs of hunger fled before stabs of apprehension. I urged the two to calm down, to stay where I could watch them while I talked to the clerk. "The ladies are probably just looking around like the other tourists," I said.

Their dubious looks matched my unspoken fear—that Suda really was behind the disappearance.

The clerk was so startled when I asked him to call the police that I had to repeat the request. Then I returned to Kai and Kunishio—to wait.

Mrs. Kai and Mrs. Kunishio apologized with blushes while the *ryokan* lodgers whispered among themselves and gaped at the scene in the lobby: two elderly men, two embarrassed ladies in print kimono's, a red-haired foreigner, six uniformed cops, and one tall police inspector from another city, all trying to talk at once.

"Sam . . ." Ueki's look was almost imploring as he tried to cut into the babble.

"We are so sorry," Mrs. Kai offered, apparently too flustered to notice the interruption, "but we were only sitting in the shade of the garden."

"All's well that ends well," I philosophized secondhand. "Anyone for breakfast?"

"Sam," Ueki said again, a ripple of impatience in his tone,

"all is *not* well, and I want my fellow citizens from Okayama to hear this." He waited until he was sure of everyone's attention. "My colleagues here," and he gave the other officers an all-inclusive bow, "have canvassed this area thoroughly and have a definite identification of Yoshio Suda by a shop owner." Ueki paused, lending impact to his next words. "Suda purchased a knife—a very long, thin knife used to fillet fish. In short, he is armed with a weapon, and we do not know where he is."

Judge Kai moved closer to his wife. "I no longer doubt the need for police protection, Inspector Ueki. Is there anything we can do to make your task less arduous?"

Ueki nodded. "From this moment, until we have control over Suda, I do not want you or your wives to be unguarded. Every officer here will do his utmost, but your fullest cooperation is essential."

The judge and prosecutor promised to give it, and Mrs. Kai shyly interjected a question. "Inspector, sir, will we be able to attend the festival?"

"Oh, yes," Mrs. Kunishio said. "It would be such a disappointment not to see it after coming all this way."

Ueki gave his qualified approval, with the consent of the

local officers: the Kais and Kunishios could go anywhere they desired as long as they were accompanied by police. I then made arrangements to meet the judge, the prosecutor, and their wives for an early lunch while Ueki and the other cops set out to look for Suda.

When Inspector Ueki got back to the inn that evening, Suda still had not been found.

I wasn't prepared for the sensory shock created by the bleak surroundings of Osorezan, the Terrible Mountain. It was, I gathered, an extinct volcano, standing like a mute giant over a terrain unlike anything I'd ever seen—or imagined. There were crater lakes of deep, still water, and the barren, boulder-strewn ground, the sluggish streams, and the underground springs all gave off the stench of sulphur, an invisible, eye-stinging effluvium that was wafted for kilometers around on a moaning wind.

At Osorezan, I thought, the ancient and the modern met in a clash bewildering to the western mind. Pilgrims came by bus and ferry to make offerings, mingling with throngs of camera-wielding tourists, while Buddhist mendicants wearing umbrella-shaped straw hats accepted alms. Elsewhere, throngs of the hopeful gathered to ask

spirit mediums to cross the gulf between the living and the dead.

Mimao Kai and Tadayoshi Kunishio, at dinner the night before, had outlined some of the beliefs concerning the Terrible Mountain. Over a red drum bridge spanning a lifeless lake called the Pond of Blood for its coloration, the souls of the newly deceased were thought to make the crossing to the other world. Many held Osorezan to be the home of the oldest gods of Japan, where spirits and demons also roamed the rugged earth.

Here, too, was Saino-kawara, the Buddhist netherworld for the souls of unfortunate children who die before they thank their parents for giving them life. These forlorn shadows, so tradition goes, must spend all eternity mounding up pebbles, their task always undone by heartless demons who trample their unending labors.

Judge Kai, who had watched my expression carefully during this part of the discussion, told me with a reassuring smile that many Japanese also believed that the spirits of all other departed children were guarded over by a special being named Jizo. During the festival, Kai said, hundreds of pilgrims would offer straw sandals to protect Jizo's feet from the hot, sulphurous grounds while he kept watch over his wards.

I thought at length about what the judge said. On the one hand, there was a tradition about the fate of children who don't show gratitude to their parents, and on the other, there was the legend of an entity who forever keeps the rest from harm. I decided that the story of the hopeless task of mounding pebbles was for the benefit of youngsters, urging them to show respect, and that the other was an indication of the deep love I knew the Japanese have for children.

Now, under the blazing sun of a new morning, I was caught up by mounting interest in the object of our outing—a meeting with the *itako*, or spirit mediums.

Since our early arrival, the mediums, all older women, had been waiting while friends and relatives pitched army surplus tents. With two uniformed policemen standing by to prevent an unwanted appearance by Yoshio Suda, we entered one of them.

The *itako*, seated on a straight-backed chair, was, like many of the other mediums, totally blind, dressed in simple clothing of the countryside and fingering a rosary of wood beads so rapidly they hissed like the wind-blown sands of the desert.

Mrs. Kai approached the *itako* first, addressing her as *O-funi*,

which might be translated as Stepping Stone, or, simply, Missive. The *itako*, in a warm, friendly voice, asked for the names of relatives or friends who had died, requesting times, places, and causes of death. Mrs. Kai complied, and the *itako* shut her unseeing eyes and began a singsong chant in a rural dialect I had trouble following.

Soon the messages came, all of them severely practical, far from what I'd expected from the other side of the known. A brother suggested that Mrs. Kai have some dental work done, and a cherished friend sent the opinion that the dwarf plum trees in the Kai garden be pruned more carefully.

Mrs. Kunishio was next, and the spirit medium passed along loving recommendations from a deceased sister to replace the tiles on the Kunishio house and to put in a new gas heater for the bath water.

From what the judge had told us, I knew there was no set fee for the services rendered by the *itako*, but Mrs. Kunishio left three thousand yen and Mrs. Kai presented the medium with a box containing a whole salted salmon.

We left the canvas shelter, and I saw that almost all the people queued up to see the mediums were women. Then

as we turned away to walk toward the Entsuji Temple in the near distance, a man darted from behind the tents and struck Judge Kai across the face with a cylinder of some sort, which he then dropped.

"Yoshio Suda!" Inspector Ueki shouted.

My own immediate concern was with helping the judge, who staggered against me with a groan of pain. As soon as I determined that he wasn't hurt badly, I looked up and made out Ueki and the two uniformed officers trying to find a passage through the center of a group of pilgrims. The man they were chasing was fleeing toward the Pond of Blood.

Even from a distance, it was possible to tell what the man was holding aloft in one hand.

It was a knife, its shiny blade sending back white bursts of reflected sunlight.

I started running.

Yoshio Suda died by his own hand, in a way only the older generation can recall. When Ueki finally managed to get to him, Suda was already slipping away fast, seated by the Pond of Blood, the knife handle jutting from his abdomen in the self-destruction known as *hara-kiri*.

Suda knew, as did we, that the two policemen would not be

able to return with help in time to save him. Inspector Ueki honored Suda's plea to die unassisted, making no move to make him more comfortable.

"Before this hour is out, Suda-san," Ueki said, "you will undertake your last journey—across the bridge of drums on the Pond of Blood. I think the burden your soul carries will be lighter if you make a gift of truth. Who, Suda-san, murdered your wife, why did Hisao Nakai exonerate you, and why did you strike Judge Kai before you chose *harakiri*?"

Suda's body jerked in a spasm of pain, and then he began to speak, eyes on the far side of the Pond of Blood. "I did kill my wife," he said without emotion, "but it was my right to do so, and I have no regrets."

He related how, those many years past, he and his wife had grown apart, how he had long tolerated her gibes and sarcasm directed at his absences from home, how he had endured her complaints about having a husband who neglected her, denying her the love and attention she deserved. Gradually, Suda said, he became suspicious, of his wife's fidelity, and he began to discuss his suspicions with Hisao Nakai, who consistently replied that Suda was overworked, was imagining a situation that really did not exist.

Nakai's point of view, Suda went on, appeared reasonable, and one evening when the bulk of paperwork at his office seemed unusually oppressive, he decided after everyone else was gone to go home early and make amends with his wife.

That evening, however, he found her absent. Suda, angry, heated a pitcher of sake and waited. After his wife returned by taxi, teasing him and laughing at his rage, which was soaring out of control, Suda demanded to know whom she had been with. Mrs. Suda, unrelenting and undaunted, had changed from skirt and blouse into a light blue house kimono. She was combing out her long black hair as she taunted Suda, saying that if she did have a lover, it was because of Suda's inattention.

It was then that Suda had ripped the sash from her kimono and strangled her. When his senses returned, he found himself back at his office, still confused and disoriented. He called Nakai and asked him to meet him for drinks and a meal at a restaurant they sometimes used for business negotiations.

Suda's face was drenched with perspiration by now, and Ueki gave him a handkerchief. "Suda-san, did you tell Nakai what you had done, that your wife was dead?"

"No," Suda said, his words slurred. "I was dazed . . . maybe too much sake to drink. Shock, I do not know, but did not comprehend that . . . I had killed her. Not then, when I met Nakai. Not yet. Recall saying I was tired. Very tired. Later, I realized. Left Nakai, went home. Called police, hoped they would believe I discovered . . . body."

"At your trial," Ueki said, "you insisted that you had done no wrong, and we also fail to grasp why Nakai proclaimed your innocence more than two decades after he gave the authorities grounds for the murder charge."

Suda's eyes were glazed, and I knew that the strand of remaining life was stretching thin. "In old Japan . . . a man's right . . . severely punish unfaithful wife. But . . . changes. Evil. New ideas . . . corrupt. Nakai wrote letters saying wife unworthy. Only truth he ever uttered . . . ever. He thought to . . . to placate me. Never . . . never forgive."

"Nakai?" Ueki said. "Why did Nakai set you free?"

Suda shivered violently. "Nakai was . . . weakling. Treacherous, weak. Wanted to kill him, but . . . denied me . . . pleasure. I guessed. Guessed . . . right after accused me, but useless. Ask Mrs. Nakai. She may know . . . may tell."

His face suddenly relaxed, Suda stopped speaking. Ueki sighed heavily, reached down to close the dead man's eyes, and laid the body back on the hard ground. "We are finished here, Sam. Suda murdered and then confused justice with outmoded and one-sided codes of conduct." He turned away from the corpse and looked at a crowd of curious onlookers being kept away by the prefecture police. "Let us go see if Judge Kai can help us understand why Suda's revenge was no more than a blow to the face."

Ueki walked on, but I lingered, wondering what Suda had expected to find by the Pond of Blood, on the other side of the drum bridge that led from life to death. The forgiving soul of an unfaithful murdered wife? The approval of kindred spirits?

The smell of sulphur was overwhelming, and I hurried to catch up with the inspector.

Judge Kai's nose was bandaged when we met for dinner that night, but he said nothing was broken and that the pain was minimal. The bamboo tube he'd been hit with held a rolled-up piece of foolscap on which Suda had written a condemnation of modern values and what he termed the degeneration of all the old, unwritten laws.

"I deliver this," the scroll said, "as a gesture of contempt, thankful that fate decreed more than a simple protest of your ignorance over the telephone and brought me to confront you in this land of our ancient gods. At first, I planned to kill you and that lesser fool, Prosecutor Kunishio, but could not bring myself to soil my hands on ignoble lackeys of feeble and worthless laws. For choking off the life of a wanton woman who defiled her sacred marriage vows, you judged *me* a criminal. My blood is let with pride in a heritage you have forsaken."

Inspector Ueki poured wine vinegar on his salad. "As far as I am concerned, all that matters is the welfare of honest citizens, not the verbiage of fanatics."

Judge Kai accomplished a feat of dexterity with chopsticks, navigating a chunk of melon cleanly past mustaches and beard. "Suda," he said, "failed to recognize that what prevailed in our feudal past is no longer suitable. Without laws that are equally applicable to all, we would not be a democracy."

Prosecutor Kunishio agreed. "I, for one," he said, "will never, never be ashamed of having brought transgressors before our courts. And you, Inspector Ueki, are especially deserving of

praise for your dedication to the enforcement of our laws and the prevention of crime."

Ueki mashed out a cigarette. "Thank you, and please enjoy the rest of your vacation. When all of us are back in Okayama, it may be that we will meet again." He turned to me. "As we will be staying at the *ryokan* until morning, Sam, why not bring in the fan? Tonight promises to be one of the the hottest of the summer, and we need a good rest for the long drive back."

"You got it," I said with a grin. "Be back in a jiffy."

I whistled all the way to the car, congratulating myself for leaving the fan there. Our room at the inn wasn't air-conditioned, and now we'd have some much-welcomed relief. I unlocked the door and flinched at the ovenlike interior temperature, then leaned in and pulled out . . . the remains.

Unbelieving, I turned what was left of the fan around and around in my hands. The metal motor housing and guard were intact, but the plastic blades had melted, collapsing into shapeless gray blobs.

"It's ruined," I said when I got back to our table, holding the useless appliance out for visible proof.

"Do not worry, Sam," Ueki said sympathetically. "We will

rely on another method of keeping ourselves cool."

"Such as?"

He grinned. "Another cold beer before we retire. I hope it will restore your normal good cheer."

It helped, but I kept visualizing Yumiko's face when she learned what happened to the fan I forgot to remove from a hot car.

We returned to Okayama in the middle of the next afternoon, and I drove Ueki directly to Mrs. Nakai's house. The widow, dressed in black, invited us in as soon as the inspector identified himself and introduced me. She carefully laid out the best pairs of house slippers at the entranceway, and bowing, with hands pressed flat against her knees, she begged us to make ourselves comfortable in the front room. She then backed out of the room with more bows and went to the kitchen to fix a platter of cakes and to brew tea.

Ueki waited for an appropriate interval after she served us before telling her the circumstances of Yoshio Suda's death and mentioning all the points that remained unclear. "Suda suggested," Ueki said, "that you might have information I need to close this case."

Mrs. Nakai looked up at a black-bordered photograph of her husband on the wall. "There were many untruths in Hisao Nakai's life that brought me unending sorrow, Ueki-san, but he was my husband and I kept my silence."

"Of course," the inspector said. "I am not here to accuse you of anything or to criticize you, Mrs. Nakai, only to clarify."

She opened the doors of the past for us then with a dignity and composure that, under the circumstances, I regarded as remarkable. Of all the painful memories she unlocked that day, the one that surprised me was put so simply that I can easily recall her thin, strained voice as she brought it forth.

"My husband, you see, was Mrs. Suda's secret lover."

Link by link, Mrs. Nakai proceeded from this revelation until the chain of human passions was complete, beginning with loneliness and lust and ending with suicide in a desolate corner of the earth.

It began with a chance meeting: Nakai was invited to dine with Mr. and Mrs. Suda on one of the infrequent occasions that Yoshio Suda took his wife out to dinner. Nakai became infatuated, and Mrs. Suda encouraged him. Rendezvous were arranged, and the relationship was entering its fourth month

when Suda murdered his wife.

In the months after the slaying, Hisao Nakai told his wife about the trysts, pleading for compassion, entreating her to tell no one, promising never again to stray from her side. He admitted that he had been so infuriated by the loss of a woman he thought he loved that he fabricated a story of threats—threats Suda had never made.

Mrs. Nakai forgave her husband, but he could not emerge from the torment and confusion he lived with daily. Increasingly, as time passed, Nakai claimed that he was able to see the world through Suda's eyes, to share the dismay that had swept over his friend when Suda began to suspect Mrs. Suda's marital fidelity. The explosion of rage that left Mrs. Suda with a kimono sash knotted tightly around her throat? Nakai convinced himself that it was natural, something any husband could do, an act for which a man should not be punished.

And so, Mrs. Nakai told us, Nakai expressed these feelings in his unanswered letters to Suda, trying to soothe his own guilt but never finding the courage to disclose that he, indirectly, had caused Mrs. Suda's death.

Once Nakai knew that a lingering illness he had contracted was terminal, he devised

the stratagem of a dying statement—a statement contending that he had accused Suda of threatening to kill his wife because he felt Suda had cheated him in business.

"Would I be correct," Ueki said, "if I assumed that your husband waited so long because he wanted to be beyond the questioning that might have uncovered his final lie?"

"Yes," the widow said, tears forming in her eyes.

"One thing more," Ueki said, standing up, "and we will leave you to your privacy. Did your husband realize that Suda, once out of prison, might try to retaliate against the people who sent him there?"

Mrs. Nakai put her hands to her face. "His last words to me were that he hoped he had caused no more grief to anyone."

"Thank you," the inspector said gently, and we left her to what I knew was a personal hell.

We went to my car and rolled down the windows. "Toshihiko," I said, "this could have been a lot worse. Suda might have killed the judge and prosecutor if he hadn't gotten so wrapped up in noble gestures of contempt. Nakai should have known better than to let him loose, no matter how guilty he felt."

The inspector loosened his tie

and unbuttoned his collar. "If everyone 'knew better,' there would be no need for the police. Shall we go now? There are still several working hours ahead of me."

I drove him to headquarters, extended an invitation to dinner, and checked in at the office.

There is a drink, cool and refreshing, that our family often enjoys in the garden at the end of the day. It is concocted from the juice of lemons, water, sugar, and ice, and most of my Japanese friends call it remonade.

Seated at the circular stone table near the plum trees that night, I was sipping this drink in contented silence with Inspector Ueki while we watched the domestic scene around us: Noriko and Mrs. Ueki in animated conversation with a neighbor lady standing on her verandah, Yumiko laughing as the boys played in front of a lantern, using their hands to cast shadow figures against a wall.

All about us, there was the rustle of breezes stirring through the trees, the chirping of crickets from the shrubs and flowerbeds, and the perfume of roses and sweet alyssum. On the horizon, above the snaggle-toothed outline of mountain peaks, a full moon rose in a

glory of golden orange.

Perfection, I thought with a sigh. I craned my neck back to fix my sights on the Big Dipper. How many people, I wondered, knew that the second star in the handle was a double, one bright, the other so dim it took concentration to find it? From there, I slipped into one of my favorite reveries, trying to guess which of the stars I could see had planets, maybe life, and, possibly, people just like us, all seated in their gardens, having the same hopes and problems we do.

"Toshihiko," I said, "have you ever thought. . . ?"

But then, with a start, I saw that Yumiko was coming our way, ankle-length granny skirt flapping with her brisk stride.

"Uh-oh!" I groaned. "Here comes some flak about the fan!"

"Allow me to handle this," the inspector said. "Yumiko-san," he told her, once she was at the table, "Sam did not return the fan. While he was aiding me in the task of protecting innocent lives, there was no time to remove it from his automobile, and the blades melted in the heat."

"I came to ask if you want more lemonade," she said.

Lemonade! And Ueki had to go and bring up that blasted fan!

The inspector smiled but

sailed on in the same direction. "I would like for everyone to hear what I have to say." He called out for Noriko, Mrs. Ueki, and the boys, then stood up to address them. "When Sam drove me to Osorezan, he did so at his own expense. Because of that, and because of many other generous acts which have been of benefit to the police, my fellow officers have donated a sum of money, used to replace an item Sam was fond of."

"A new fan!" I said. "You guys actually chipped in to buy one for me?"

Noriko took her father's arm and squeezed it. "That was so kind of you. Sam and I both thank you."

"Indeed," Mrs. Ueki added, "it is not every man who is fortunate enough to have such a son-in-law. Where is this fan, husband? We would like to see you present it now."

For long seconds, Ueki stood like a silent statue, looking at no one. "Ah, yes. The fan."

Yumiko stepped toward him. "Hai. The fan."

Ueki picked up his empty

glass, looked at the lantern light through it, and put it down again. "Where. You want to know where it is."

I felt like the Big Dipper had just poured cold water on me. "Toshihiko, it could happen to anyone. I mean, all of us can get busy, you know—preoccupied. Me. Take me, for instance. Look, I can come to headquarters tomorrow, pick it up."

With a prolonged chuckle, Inspector Ueki stooped down and pulled a beautifully wrapped carton from under the table. "I put it here while everyone was finishing dinner, Sam. May both of you last forever."

In the midst of all the people who made life so worthwhile, I helped with the gleeful unwrapping and joined in the applause as old Yumiko carried the fan inside for a ceremonial placing on the straw matting.

I stayed behind in the garden by myself for a while. "Thank you," I smiled, looking up at all those twinkling stars once more.

I didn't consider it necessary to say what for.

UNSOLVED

by George J. Summers

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the January issue.

Professor Dimwit's answer key to a physics test was stolen one day during one of his physics classes. Only three students—Amos, Burt, and Cobb—had the opportunity to steal the answer key.

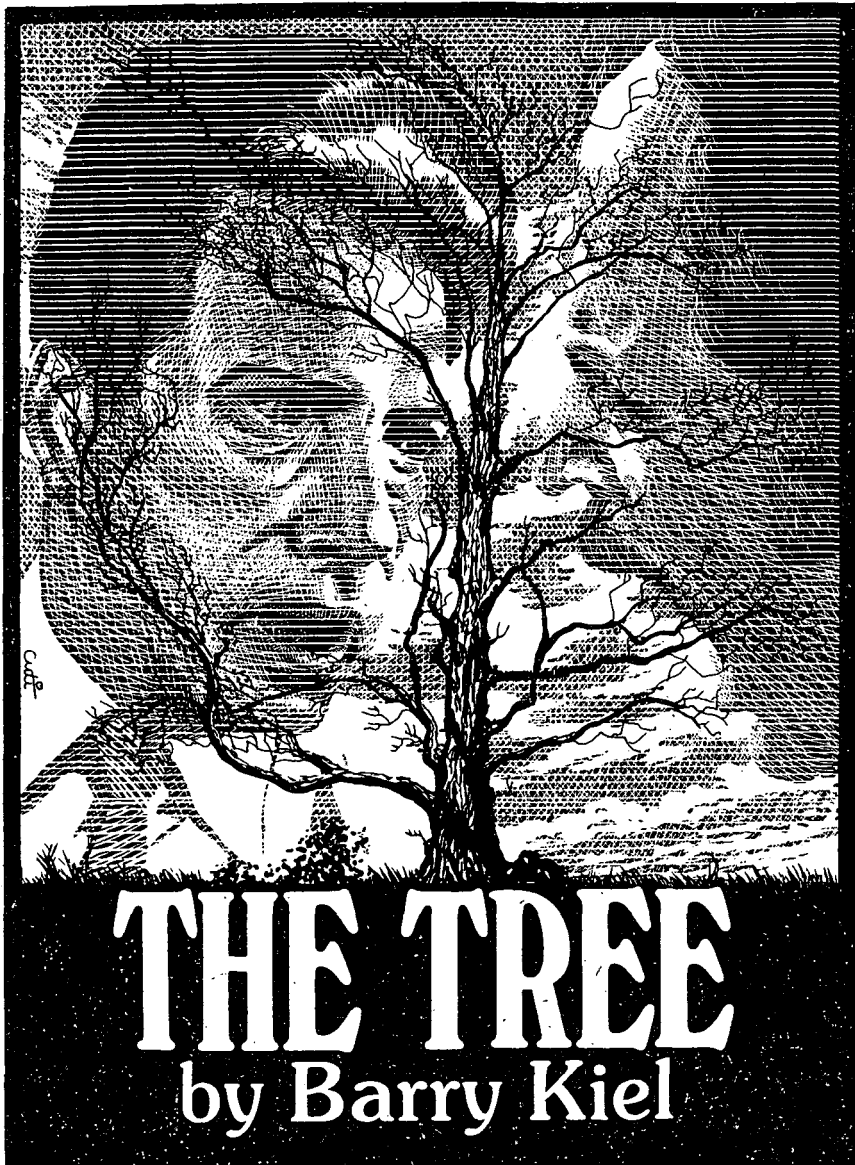
1. Five physics classes had been held in the room that day.
2. Amos attended only two of the classes.
3. Burt attended only three of the classes.
4. Cobb attended only four of the classes.
5. The professor conducted only three of the classes.
6. Each of the three students attended only two of the professor's classes.
7. No two of the five classes were attended by the same group of students from the three students under suspicion.
8. Two of the three students, who attended one of the professor's classes that the third student did not attend, were proven innocent of the theft.

Which one of the three students stole the answer key?

See page 146 for the solution to the December puzzle.

"The Student Thief," taken from New Puzzles in Logical Deduction by George J. Summers. Copyright © 1968 by George J. Summers. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.

FICTION



THE TREE

by Barry Kiel

Illustration by Nicola Cuti

Harvey Mortenson got the contract to take out the old maple tree in front of the school.

It was not that he really wanted to. Twenty-five years ago, it was Harvey who planted it. The job marked, for him, the beginning of his nursery business, and he drew a parallel between the rich growth of the tree and the success of his business.

Harvey bid low. There was only one other bidder, Jack's Tree Service in Aitkin, who usually ran high, but Harvey didn't want anyone else touching that tree. It held deep memories for him, both good and bad.

He phoned Mildred.

"Don't fix supper," he told her. "I'd like to take you to Davie's tonight."

She agreed and after a minute of small talk, they hung up. Harvey looked at her picture on his desk. Mildred had held her attractiveness for the twenty years of their marriage. He hoped he had made her happy during those years. The disappearance of her first husband five years before her wedding to Harvey had been hard on her.

Frank Matthews, Mildred's first husband, had been Harvey's partner at the very beginning of the nursery. The two of them did pretty well during the nine months they worked together. Then Frank decided to toss it all aside for a redheaded clerk at Dunby's Grocery. At least, that's what Frank had written in the note he left on Harvey's desk. The note ended, "I know, Harv, that you'll understand."

Understand nothing, thought Harvey, I still don't understand. Millie was the best, pure gold. Why Frank would have ever run out for some cheap skirt was beyond him.

Harvey remembered reading the note again in shock. Then there was a noise in the next office. Slowly, he opened the door between the two offices, at first just a slit, then wide enough to step in.

"What the hell are you doing?" Harvey even recalled the rage in his voice.

Frank stood before him, startled.

"Harv," he stuttered, "I . . . I didn't hear . . ."

Harvey remembered as vividly as if it had been yesterday watching the pen fall from his partner's trembling hand onto the open checkbook on the desk and roll to the floor. He stepped close enough to read the entry on the check: "Cash Draw—Frank Matthews."

The amount was three thousand dollars. Harvey turned solemnly toward his now terrified partner.

"Harv, I'm . . ."

Harvey's fist cut short the words.

It was a long time before Mildred gave up hope of Frank's return and filed for divorce on grounds of abandonment. A year later she agreed to marry Harvey. The years since had been happy, good years.

Harvey laid down the pencil he discovered he was turning in his fingers. He went to his office door and called into the shop to his foreman.

"We got another job, Bill," he said as the two stood next to the new dozer.

"It's that maple in front of the grade school. They're expanding the building right straight out and it's got to go. We'll probably get the bid on new landscaping when the time comes."

"I'll have a crew get on it tomorrow."

"Good. Start after lunch. I'll come by to see how things are going later on. I want to be in on this one myself. Planted that tree twenty-five years ago with my own hands."

They enjoyed the evening. The dinner at Davie's was the best ever. Millie was delighted with her crab legs and Harvey basked in her delight but only half finished his fillet of cod. They dined casually and got home quite late. Harvey announced he planned to take at least the morning off and maybe not go to work until mid-afternoon.

Following a light breakfast of toast and juice, Harvey and Millie drove over to Bay City to do some shopping in the new mall. On the way out of town, they passed by the school, and Harvey slowed to a stop in front of the tree.

"Tree's got a lot of good years in it," he observed. "More than me. If they'd only leave it alone. Progress!" he puffed.

"It's beautiful," Mildred said.

They drove on and shopped until lunch. She bought him a couple of shirts while he browsed in the bookstore. They lunched on soup and French bread. Millie surprised him with the shirts. They drove quietly home.

"Think I'll go see how Bill's doing with that tree." He looked at his watch. "They should've gotten a good start by now."

He kissed her.

"You're sentimental over that tree," she said squeezing his arm. "Don't let it get you down."

"I won't," he promised.

No leaves were left. All of the smaller branches were gone. A man in a lift-bucket was using a small chain saw on the remaining branches while two others below cleared the debris.

"We'll have her down to the stump in forty-five minutes," Bill assured.

"I see that," Harvey confirmed the estimate. "Leave it then. Tie the chain and cat to it and leave it. I want to pull it out myself just like I put it in."

Harvey drove to the office, checked his mail, and answered a couple of minor phone messages. He then drove home by way of the school. The cat was in position and the chain secured. It looked as if his men were just finishing severing the largest roots.

"Those roots are really in there," he explained to Millie when he got home. "They reach as far out as the branches did above the ground."

"I know," she answered, then added with a tolerant look, "I remember my high school botany."

"Sure you do," Harvey responded with a slight smile.

Harvey set his alarm clock for five in the morning. On most days, whenever possible, he would start the day before sunrise and be well into a job before most townspeople left for work. When the alarm sounded, he arose, eager to get on with his task. As he dressed, he noticed his watch was almost forty-five minutes ahead of the alarm. The electricity had been out. He quickened his pace in an attempt to make up for lost time. It had begun to rain. It made a gentle, soothing sound on the windshield as he drove to the school.

It was close to seven when he fired up the cat. For a moment, he wondered if the noise might stir or, perhaps, even anger neighbors. He didn't need them poking their heads out at him. On the other hand, most people knew him and knew of his practice of working and having his crew work at this hour. Confident they'd understand, Harvey continued. Besides, pulling up the roots wouldn't take all that long. Cleaning out the cavity would be quieter work.

The tractor pulled evenly and powerfully on the increasingly wet ground. The tracks dug through the school lawn, and the stump slowly tipped and emerged from the ground. Clumps of dirt stuck tenaciously to the roots to which they had clung for twenty-five years. Roots snapped. Harvey kept the cat at a steady, slow speed. The stump and its severed roots finally let go and was dragged a few yards from what was now a ragged hole. The rain came a little heavier.

Harvey shut the tractor off and worked quickly to clean away debris left in the cavity. Using a front end loader, he filled the dump truck with sod and broken roots. He would take this first load to the new landfill and let his crew finish later in the morning. The sun was rising above the horizon, but he still needed to use a light to check the area. Only clean, rich dirt lay there, smooth except for the rivulets and puddles caused by the steady, soaking rain.

"It'll be one of those all day rains," Harvey thought as he pulled away with the dump truck.

Forty minutes later he was back with the empty truck. Kids were already arriving for school. A dozen or so were standing by the spot where the tree had been. Some wore yellow rubber rain-coats with hoods, others the newer kind of colored rain outfits; a couple held umbrellas.

"Bet they miss that tree," Harvey reflected as he parked the truck. A peal of thunder cracked in the distance. Harvey made a sudden plan to stop at B.B.'s Diner for eggs and toast. Two more girls joined the crowd of children gathered by the hole, which was filling with water. Harvey saw their faces broaden and heard their gasps as they took their places with the others. He turned to look at the tree stump at which all the children were staring. Pieces of mud fell of their own weight and the rain washed particles of dirt from the tangle of roots. The human skull wedged in the roots became slowly more and more visible as the rain rinsed away the years.

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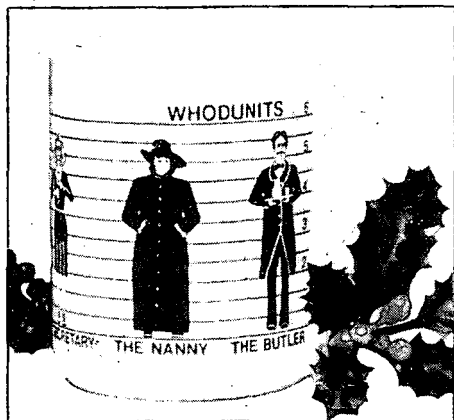
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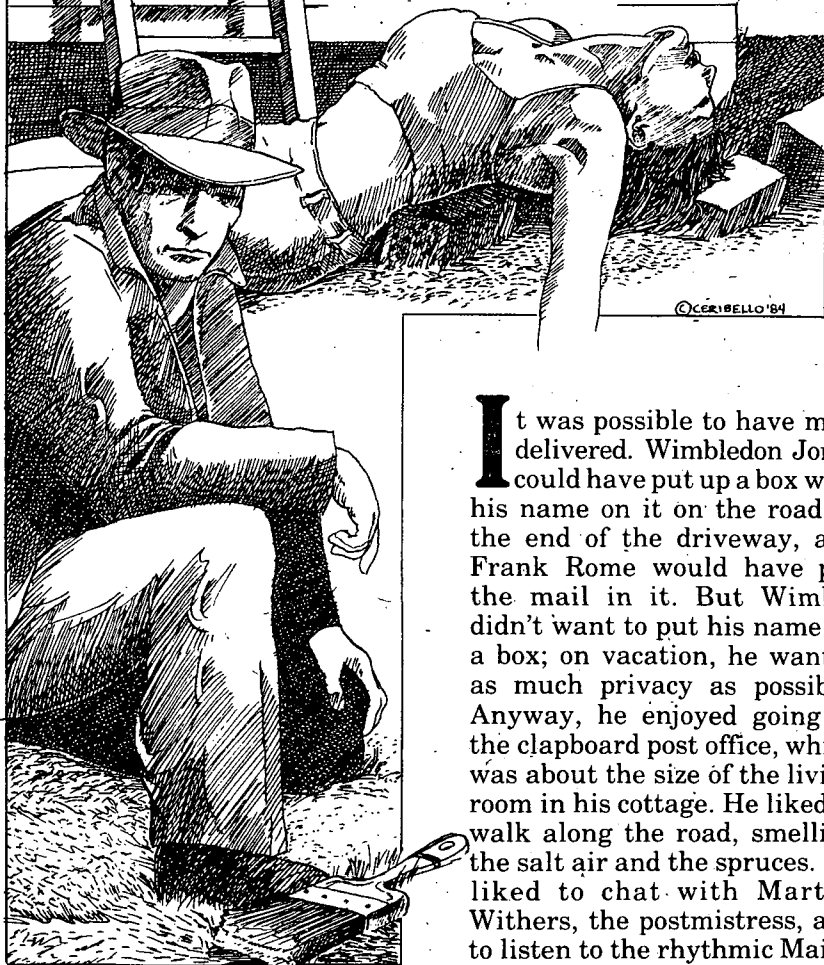


Illustration by Jim Ceribello

It was possible to have mail delivered. Wimbledon Jones could have put up a box with his name on it on the road at the end of the driveway, and Frank Rome would have put the mail in it. But Wimbie didn't want to put his name on a box; on vacation, he wanted as much privacy as possible. Anyway, he enjoyed going to the clapboard post office, which was about the size of the living room in his cottage. He liked to walk along the road, smelling the salt air and the spruces. He liked to chat with Martha Withers, the postmistress, and to listen to the rhythmic Maine voices. Summer people and year-

round people went in to pick up or post mail and talk with Martha. He could also find out a lot about what was going on.

This morning, for example, he found out about Harriet Summers.

"—her being all alone like that," Jeb Stinton was saying as Wimbie opened the screen door. Jeb, Tom Lawson's deputy, was standing at the window in the partition that divided the post office into about ten square feet of public space and eight square feet of space for the postmistress.

"It certainly was an awful thing," Martha Withers was saying. "Morning, Wimbie." She had seen him coming and had his mail in her hand. "I guess you heard about Harriet Summers."

"No, I haven't." Because he was a private detective and a friend of the chief of police, people sometimes expected Wimbie to know a great deal more than he did.

"She was painting her cottage yesterday and fell off the ladder. She hit her head on a stone. It killed her. I guess Matt Rambler brought that pile of stones up there to build her a fireplace he never got around to building."

"That's what I mean about being alone," Jeb said. "Nobody found her till noon when the Kingsleys went by. Seems they

were all going to play bridge in the evening."

"I think they did that regular," Martha said. She shook her head. "I feel bad that I used to think critical of her sometimes. She'd come in here on a warm day in a halter and very short shorts. I've heard it said that she wore a bikini bathing suit over to the Lily Pond to swim. People around here don't wear clothes like that. But I guess it was just her way. She'd work down there at her typewriter in the morning, then come up here soon's the post office opened in the afternoon. Then she'd go down and paint her cabin or mow or some such thing. She was a pleasant person and never caused any bother."

Wimbie, doing errands in the village, thought about Harriet Summers. He had known her slightly. She was a single woman, close to forty probably, still attractive, dark-haired and sexy-voiced. She worked in a library in Boston and came here for summer vacations in a cabin she'd bought on a dead-end dirt road that went down to the water. She wrote novels and short stories, although Wimbie didn't think she'd ever published anything. Wimbie had great sympathy for people who tried to write. He'd once had

writing ambitions himself; he'd wanted to write detective stories, but then he got bogged down in the detecting he'd meant to use as his material.

What was it about Harriet Summers—something incomplete, not all together? He puzzled over an exact definition.

Walking along Water Street, he stopped at the office of the chief of police. The little white building had its back to the view of the water, the boats, the fishing pier, and the islands beyond. It faced the street, where the local populace passed by on foot, cycle, and car.

"Good morning, Tom."

Tom Lawson looked up. His eyes were the color of the sea on a fine day; they caught the morning light.

"Morning, Wimbie. Like a cup of coffee?"

"If it's handy, that would be good."

Tom stood up and went over to a half-full coffeemaker and poured a cup. A tall, neat, gray-haired man, he looked dignified even when bending over the coffeemaker. Wimbie sometimes felt small, dark, and grubby next to him.

"I can guess what you're thinking about. Harriet Summers. I guess you just heard about it in the post office."

"Mind-reading again," said Wimbie as Tom handed him the cup.

"Nope. Jeb told me. It looks pretty straightforward. She was up on a ladder on the concrete base Matt Rambler laid for the chimney he's going to build when he gets around to it. Down below the ladder there's a big pile of beach stones he hauled up there for the chimney. Matt always works first for those who yell the loudest. Harriet didn't seem to yell so much, so she hadn't got her chimney." Tom seated himself again at his desk. "Anyway, somehow she fell. Ladder didn't slip. The paint bucket was still up there. The brush was on the ground. I guess she lost her balance. It's easy to do. I was painting my house a while back and almost lost my balance when a mosquito bit my leg. I was wearing shorts. When I slapped at that mosquito, I almost went over."

"I've never thought of you as owning a pair of shorts, Tom."

Tom grinned. "That was about the only time it was hot enough around here to wear those shorts. Maybe if I was more used to shorts, I wouldn't have got so excited about that mosquito. Anyway, something like that probably happened yesterday. I didn't see any evidence of foul play."

"What was she wearing when she died?"

"Shorts and a T-shirt. No bra. Plenty of skin for the mosquito to get at. That was the way

she always dressed. She kept pretty much to herself, though. I think she and the Kingsleys played bridge once a week, along with Bob Ecker. They're the ones that found her, at least Evan Kingsley did. The trouble was, she was painting the side of the house away from the road, so nobody saw her.

He paused and reflected for a moment. "I don't know that it would have done any good if they had. Doc Cameron says she died pretty quick. She'd been dead a while when he got there. Nobody much goes down that road, anyway, except to see her and the Blakes, and the Blakes aren't here. Bob Ecker keeps his boat down there sometimes—he'd gone out from down there yesterday, but he was on the water at the time she hit her head. What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking that she usually spent the mornings inside writing and the afternoons working on the place, and this happened in the morning, right?"

"Yep, I guess that's so. Maybe she didn't have anything to say that morning, or maybe somebody was coming to visit and she wanted to get the house fixed up. She did have people stay down there sometimes. Could have been a lot of reasons she was out there in the morning.

"Martha Withers might know if she was expecting somebody," he added. "Sometimes I think Martha knows a lot more about what's going on than I do. Not that she's any nosier than anybody else, it's just that people tell her things and people talk in the post office. Martha knows who's coming and going because she has to hold or forward mail. A lot of people tell their visitors to go there for directions, or people who don't know how to get where they're going just naturally go to the post office to ask. It's kind of a nerve center."

Wimbie thought of a recent conversation with his wife. Sarah had said, "I'm never sure what the proper etiquette is about depositing mail—whether I should hand it to Martha or put it in the slot beside the window that says 'Deposit mail here.' Maybe it's demeaning to Martha to hand it to her and make her put it in the box. But if I hand it to her, I'm showing that I'm not keeping it from her if she wants to read it. It's a very difficult mini-moral problem."

"I would think she'd be interested to know who's mailing letters to interesting places or what chitchat people put on postcards. I certainly would be," Wimbie had replied.

"Oh, you!" Sarah had said. "Mr. Curiosity himself. You've

got more of it than anybody."

Now, sitting in Tom's office, Wimbie felt very curious.

Tom pushed back his chair. "You've given me an idea, Wimbie—as you very well know," he said.

Wimbie rose. "I've got to do some errands."

He walked off toward the hardware store and Tom went to the post office.

"Morning, Martha." Tom saw that Martha wanted

to say something, but he went ahead and asked his question. "Do you know if Harriet Summers was expecting anybody to come to visit?"

"Oh, Tom, I'm glad you've come! A while back, she did say something about her nephew who was coming down, but she didn't say when, or if she did I don't remember. But just a few minutes ago there was a young man in here asking directions to her place. I didn't know exactly what to say. Seemed it wasn't my place to break the news to him, but then he'd go down there and not find her, so I just said there'd been an accident, and she was over in the hospital. Funny, I thought he looked kind of relieved. I remember now there was a young boy came here with her brother years ago. There's a strong fam-

ily resemblance. I remember it from then. But I don't think he's been here for a long time."

"Did he go over to the hospital?"

"I guess he did. I told him where it was."

The hospital was a handsome old house facing out across the harbor, with a new wing added to it.

"I've just been trying to reach you, Tom," said the aide at the desk, as he came in. "This is William Summers, Miss Summers' nephew. He's been waiting for you."

"Terrible thing," Tom said, looking at the young man. Dark hair, a pale face, slender, almost skinny, wearing jeans and a down jacket over a T-shirt. Early twenties, maybe. Something sad and beaten about him. He looked familiar. He looked like Harriet Summers, but there was something else, too.

As the two men went off toward the hospital morgue, Tom asked, "You just get into town today?"

"Yes, I was coming to visit her."

"Funny. I thought I saw you down on Water Street yesterday when the schooner was in."

The young man stopped; his shoulders slipped forward. He's lost the wind in his sails, Tom thought. "I shouldn't have tried that," William mumbled. "Yes,

I came yesterday. I came on the bus and walked to the cabin. She was lying there. I didn't know what to do. I was afraid somebody would think I did it, so I walked back. The bus was just coming through the other way. I went to Warrenton and hitchhiked back today."

Tom looked at him carefully, wondering. "What time were you down there?"

"A little after ten, I guess. The bus was supposed to get in at nine forty-five."

"Did you see anybody near the cabin?"

"No."

"Did you see anything else around there?"

William hesitated. "No. There was a truck—" He frowned.

"Where did you see the truck?"

"It was parked down below, near the water."

"What kind of truck was it?"

"A panel truck."

"Why were you afraid someone would think you did it?"

"I just was, that's all. I just wanted to get away from a bad scene. I didn't know anybody here. I didn't know what to do. I guess I did the wrong thing."

The boy really looked defeated now.

Outside the hardware store, Wimbie encountered Evan Kingsley, a distinguished looking man whose family had been summer people for generations.

White hair; rugged, youngish, handsome face. He looked unhappy. On seeing Wimbie, a sequence of expressions played across his face, but subtly. He doesn't give away much, Wimbie thought. Good old New England type. Reserved.

"I suppose you've heard about Harriet Summers," Kingsley said. He was a soft-voiced man. Wimbie liked that.

"Yes, I have."

"Dreadful thing. Ellen and I had gone by to tell Harriet that Bob Ecker had to drive his guest to the Bangor airport in the afternoon, so we'd be starting bridge an hour later than usual. Harriet doesn't have a phone, you know." He stopped. "I'm sorry. There's no need to tell you all this. I gave a statement to Tom."

"That's all right." Kingsley seemed to need to talk. "Go on."

"It was about noon. I pulled up beside the house on the road side. Ellen sat in the car. I went around and knocked at the kitchen door, but there was no sound. I called to Harriet. I thought maybe she would have heard the car and come out from wherever she was. Then I walked on around the house. There was the ladder with the bucket. And there she was, lying on the ground." He shook his head. "It was awful. I could tell she wasn't alive, but I went to the post office and called Bob

Cameron anyway."

Ellen Kingsley had come up quietly beside her husband.

"You didn't see anything?"
Wimbie asked her.

She shook her head. "I couldn't see from the car. I never did see anything. Evan wouldn't let me. I sat there wondering why Evan didn't come back. I heard him call, and then it was silent. There was only the sound of a spruce limb rubbing against another one in the wind. There's a stand of spruces right behind the house. At least, that's what I think I heard. Perhaps it was Evan exclaiming when he saw Harriet." She looked down, her voice dropping.

Wimbie went back to Tom's office. "So, you took a statement from Evan Kingsley, eh?"

"Yep. It seemed the natural and proper thing to do."

"Tom, something about this doesn't feel right to you."

"I would have taken Evan Kingsley's statement anyway, but you're right—and it's seeming wronger and wronger." Tom looked at Wimbie a moment. "Plot's thickening. Now we've got a nephew on the scene." He told him about the two arrivals of William Summers. "He says he saw a truck down by the water. That should be Bob Ecker's truck, but you can't see down to the water from her cot-

tage. I wonder why he said that. Funny, I saw him yesterday on the street and something clicked, but at the time, I didn't think about what it was. For one thing, he didn't look like one of the people from the schooner cruise. For another, he looked a lot like her. But of course, I didn't know then that she was dead. He thinks there's something wrong, too. He thinks she was killed. 'Somebody would think I did it,' he said. Wonder why he said that. Of course, maybe he did do it. But there's something he's not telling me."

"Where is he now?"

"I asked him to stay around town. Jeb's got an eye on him. The boy called his father in Hartford. Father'll be here tomorrow."

Wimbie left Tom's office and went to the drugstore, where he bought and wrote a postcard.

"You wouldn't remember Harriet Summers' mailing anything special recently, would you?" he asked Martha Withers when he mailed the card.

"As a matter of fact, she did mail something registered the other day. Not many things get sent registered, so I remember that."

"Do you remember anything else about it?"

"It was a fat envelope, addressed to somebody in Boston, somebody with 'Esq.' after his

name. But I don't remember who it was."

"Well, that's something," said Wimbie. "Thanks."

"Matt Rambler was just in here. I guess he feels awful about not building that fireplace. If he'd built it, that stone wouldn't have been there for her to hit her head on. You feel guilty about things like that, even when something isn't really your fault. They were in here at the same time the other day, now as I think on it. They kind of bristled when they saw each other. They used to be friendly until he didn't build that fireplace. She said something like 'Good morning, Matt. We have some unfinished business, don't we?' Matt looked kind of sheepish. When he was young, Matt was a bit of a wild one and a devil with the girls. But he's turned out fine. He's a good stonemason, and his business is going real well. He's a hard worker, and he can do almost anything you ask him to do. Trouble is, he takes on too many things."

Evan Kingsley must have been something of a ladies' man in his day, too, Wimbie thought as he left the post office, and wondered if he still was. It was hard to tell with the quiet types. Ellen Kingsley was a very well-bred, reserved, high-strung type; maybe Evan fancied something more exciting.

He went back to Tom's office. Tom fixed him with bright-blue eyes.

"Wimbie, I think it's time we went and looked inside that cabin."

Wimbie held the office door open for him.

A chickadee fussed at them from a spruce tree as they went toward the kitchen door. The place felt haunted in the afternoon light.

Tom had locked the doors of the cabin. They had simple, old fashioned locks that worked with a skeleton key. "It won't do much good," he had said of the locking.

The walls were mellowed natural wood, uninsulated, with bookshelves nailed between the studs. There was not much furniture, but the place looked comfortable and cheerful — almost garishly cheerful in the circumstances. Red and blue pillows were piled on the daybed, and yellow pillows in an old wicker rocking chair. There were a place mat and napkin on one side of a large oval table and a typewriter on the other side. A pile of white paper was stacked beside the typewriter.

Wimbie and Tom both looked at the pile of white paper and then at each other. Tom picked it up and riffled through it.

"Nothing," he said.

They looked around the room. Everything seemed normal. There were no other papers.

A double bed took up most of the space in the bedroom. The bed was made. A shirt and jeans had been tossed on top of the spread. People often changed clothes several times a day as the temperature changed.

"She put on the midday clothes early, didn't she?" Wimbie observed. Then he paced around the house, still looking. "She was writing something. She must have been writing something."

Tom looked in the wastebasket by the table and the one in the kitchen. "Nothing in there."

They looked in a liquor carton that had been covered with contact paper and used for writing supplies. There was no sign of anything typed.

In the tray on the top of a dresser, Tom found a registered-mail slip. "At least we've got the lawyer's name and address." He looked at his watch. "It's probably too late for the office, but we might find him at home this evening."

They looked around the cabin once more, then walked out in silence. Beyond the trees they could hear surf at the end of the road. Otherwise, it was quiet, except for birdsong. There was no wind. Tom went to the road and looked down in the direction William said he'd seen the

truck. He shook his head. "Bob Ecker always parks down by the dock. I wonder why the boy said he'd seen it. I wonder how much lying he's doing."

"What about Bob Ecker? Is there any way he might fit into this?"

"Not that I see offhand. I talked to him. He was with his friend all day. They went out sailing about eight thirty, came back about two. So he says. Jim Eliot saw him out there about ten o'clock. I haven't talked to the houseguest, but the story seems all right. It's funny about that truck, though. It always seemed odd a banker'd have a truck. But he carries that little boat and a canoe and that easel he uses for his watercolors."

"Ecker's not too fond of women. Maybe he didn't like that halter and shorts."

"His alibi's pretty good. Still, there's something funny if his truck was in sight of the cabin."

They walked around the house and looked at the ladder, the cement chimney base, the pile of beach stones, one of which was bloodstained. They looked up at the ladder, tried to imagine the fall, looked at the stone again. Neither of them spoke until Tom sighed and said, "I guess it's suppertime." They got back into Tom's car.

"We know one person was down here," Tom said at last. "The nephew. And there's

something kind of wrong about him."

"We also know that Evan Kingsley was down here once, and he could have been down here before."

"It's possible. Evan's not the sort to be thought of as a suspect; still, he has to be considered. It wouldn't be the first time a murderer has 'discovered' a crime."

"I suppose nobody really knows what she was writing."

"I don't suppose even Martha Withers knows that."

"You can hear sounds a long way off around here, but I guess nobody heard a yell or a scream."

They went back to Tom's office, got on the phone, and found out that the Boston lawyer was on a plane to California.

Wimbie went home to Sarah, Tom to Maud. Jeb Stinton and his wife took young William Summers in. No one slept well.

John Summers arrived in midmorning. Wimbie was already in Tom's office, where they were looking over some papers. Summers had been in town before, and Harriet had once introduced Tom when they met on the street. Now Tom told Summers about the discovery of the body. He also told him that he was investigating. John Summers looked like Harriet, and projected something of the same

quality—attractive but a little distant, independent, private.

"You don't think it was an accident?"

"We're not sure. I don't guess you'd have an idea why anyone might want to kill your sister?"

Summers said "no" very quickly, but both Tom and Wimbie had the impression that there was something on his mind.

"Your son told us he'd been down to the house the day she died. Then he left town and came back. The second time he went to the post office to ask directions. But he'd already been there without asking."

When Tom began to speak, Summers winced and paled, but he only said, "Harriet wrote to him and gave him directions. She told him to go to the post office if he had any trouble."

That didn't explain what Tom wanted to know. Perhaps he already knew. The boy had wanted his second arrival noticed. He also wanted to find out what had happened. That was why he'd looked relieved when he'd heard his aunt was in the hospital.

"Your son lives at home?"

Summers faltered. "He—he's been staying there just recently. He doesn't really live with us."

Tom sighed. "I don't mean to trick you. We know about your son. Something about him, any-

way. When he said to me yesterday that people would think he'd killed his aunt, I wondered why he'd said that, and I did a little checking." Tom picked up a paper on his desk. "He's done time for manslaughter. Just got out. I guess that's why he hasn't been visiting his aunt recently."

He looked at John Summers, who sat in his chair as if he—or the chair—were very fragile.

"You might as well know everything," Summers said at last. "You'll find it out sooner or later, if you look. And it seems that you're looking. William was adopted by my wife and myself. He's not really our son. He's Harriet's son. When she was young, Harriet—well, she was wild, rebellious. She slept around a lot. She got pregnant when she was just a kid. She never told us who the father was. Maybe she didn't know. We took William and brought him up as our own. He still doesn't know that he's not, though I've wondered if he didn't sense something. He doesn't say much. He has a lot of Harriet in him. He's a rebel. He'd taken some drugs, and he killed a man he thought was bothering a girl."

Tom fingered the papers on his desk in the silence that followed. He felt sorry for John Summers.

"Do you know anything about your sister's having written a new will?"

Summers shook his head. It didn't seem to make any difference to him.

"Do you think she'd have much to leave?"

"I don't know. Our parents were killed in an automobile accident when we were very young. They were comfortably off and we inherited equally. We were raised by different sets of relatives. I don't know what Harriet did with her money. We didn't talk about it. There was enough money so that, if she'd invested it well, she might have a fair amount. Harriet was smart, but she wasn't sensible. She'd be just as apt to throw it away as invest it. There was a flaw in her, I guess. Maybe there is in all of us." He smiled sadly. "She loved books and writing and knew a lot about them, but aside from being a librarian, she could never do anything with that love. She tried to write, but I don't think she could ever quite pull anything together."

"You don't happen to know what she might have been writing recently?"

"I have no idea. Sometimes I think she played around so much when she was young just so she'd have something to write about. Maybe it's imagination that she lacked. She couldn't

just imagine things; she really had to do them."

The phone rang. It was the lawyer. The nephew was still the primary beneficiary; the change in the will was that Harriet Summers had a lot less to leave to him. She had also talked to the lawyer about selling the place in Maine.

Wimbie bought some more picture post-cards and then went home to lunch.

Sarah said, "You're certainly virtuous about writing cards this year."

"I have to have an excuse to go back to the post office." He finished writing a card, then turned it over to look at the photograph of a seagull against a blue sky. He ran his fingertip over the picture as he looked at it.

When he went to the post office, Matt Rambler's truck was there. It was a handsome new truck that proclaimed in fine lettering his name and occupation.

"I'm sorry those stones were laying there," Matt said, after the conventional greetings. "I hear you and Tom are investigating."

"Not really. Just tying up some loose ends."

"You know, I went down that road that morning to take a look at the Blakes' seawall.

They want me to do some work on it. I didn't see anything wrong anywhere. Bob Ecker's truck was parked down at the Blakes'."

"What time were you there?"

"About ten or so."

"You didn't stop at Harriet Summers'?"

"I was afraid if I stopped she'd be at me about that fireplace. I really did plan to get around to it this fall. I'd meant to do it a long time ago, but there've been a lot of big jobs that took time."

"You were down there about the time she fell."

"I didn't see anything, and I guess I wouldn't have heard much over the sound of the truck engine. Although she does run nice and quiet," he said with a proud gleam. He raised his hand in farewell and walked out of the post office.

Martha looked after him. "Come to think of it, I did see Matt's truck go by in that direction just before the mail came in. I noticed Bob Ecker's truck going that way, too. I guess that was earlier. I usually look out the window for the mail truck. Nothing much else to do before it gets in. I guess I remember that morning special because of what happened. And, come to think of it, I saw Evan Kingsley go along that way."

"Matt Rambler's just volun-

teered that he went down that road yesterday. That's quite a nice new truck he has," Wimbie said, as they got into Tom's car.

"Yep. He's been doing real well lately. He did a big job for the Kingsleys, another one for the Bairds."

"Trucks. There's something funny about trucks. Evan Kingsley doesn't have a truck, does he?"

"Not that I know of. I guess his family did make some money in the trucking business, but most of their money comes from banks."

Tom and Wimbie found John and William Summers down on the rocks across from Jeb's house. The tide was going out, and the rockweed swayed gently against the wet, dark stone.

"You know you're named in her will," Tom said to William.

William shrugged. "I didn't know it, but I thought maybe I was. She doesn't have any children. I thought maybe she might have changed her will when I got in trouble—that's the way she'd say it—but I hadn't seen her since I got out and I didn't know."

"Tell us again about that truck you said you saw yesterday. I don't think I understand just where that truck was parked."

William hung his head.

"Tell them the truth," John Summers said softly.

William's voice was low. "I walked along the road and saw a truck parked beside the house."

"Beside your aunt's house?"

"Yes."

"Was anyone in the truck?"

"No."

"Why didn't you tell me that yesterday?"

"Because I didn't think anybody'd believe me. Because I didn't want to get involved. Because I didn't want to blame somebody who mightn't have anything to do with it. I didn't want to get anybody in trouble."

Tom frowned. "What did you do when you saw the truck?"

"I didn't want to go in while someone was there, so I walked on down the road. There's a woods between her house and the house on the shore, so I was kind of screened off from her house. I could see another truck down below. I walked pretty slowly along the road and then I heard a door shut and a truck start off. I knew it was the truck beside her house, so I went back. I knocked on the door. I kind of felt something was wrong. The door was open, so I went inside, calling her."

"Did you see any writing lying around?"

"You mean, like something she'd been doing on the typewriter? I saw the typewriter and a pile of paper, but I didn't

see anything written. I went outside and walked around the house. I saw her lying there, and I got out of there as fast as I could."

"You didn't try to help her?"

"I didn't know what to do. I didn't know if she was dead or not. I just wanted to get out of there. I didn't want to get mixed up in it. I didn't want to go through all that stuff again. I didn't kill her. She was very nice to me."

"Why did you come back?"

"I don't know. I'd said I was coming. I thought things might get even worse if I didn't. Maybe I just wanted to know what happened. I don't know." He picked up a pebble and tossed it toward the water.

"You didn't go near her when you saw her lying there?"

"Listen, that's how I got in trouble before! I served six years because I went to help somebody else! I don't ever again want to go near anybody who's hurt or dead or dying!"

Tom let out a long breath and shook his head. A gull flying in the sun overhead laughed raucously. "I understand," Tom said quietly. "The truck by the house—was there a name on it?"

"Yes, it said, 'Matthew Rambler, Stonemason, Construction.'"

"Why would he want to kill

her?" Tom asked as they drove away. "She wasn't giving him much trouble about the fireplace. She wasn't one of the ones who squeaks."

"Maybe it was a crime of passion. They were both pretty sexy types. But I have one more idea. Before we do what we both know you have to do, let's go back to that cabin. We don't want the stonemason to stone-wall it. I had an idea while I was writing a postcard this afternoon. The message I was writing went through to the other side of the card, showed up in relief on the wings of a seagull."

"You're not going to find anything on a typewriter carriage, Wimbie, or on the wings of a seagull, either."

"Lots of people use a second sheet of paper to protect the carriage."

They pulled up at the cabin again. The air was fragrant under the spruces. There was a little wind, and two spruce branches rubbed together. In the cabin, the red and blue pillows looked too bright in the sunlight.

Tom picked up the top piece of paper from the pile and held it so that the sun raked across it. He studied it carefully.

"Well, what do you know about that?"

He handed the sheet to Wimbie, who glanced at it

and said, "I know we're lucky that it's a fresh sheet of paper." Then he read on. He handed the sheet back to Tom.

"Let's go," Tom said.

They took the sheet of paper with them.

As they were about to pass the post office, they saw Matt's truck parked there.

"I guess he must need to talk to somebody," Tom said as he pulled in behind it. "It might as well be us."

After Matt Rambler was safely locked up, Tom and Wimbie sat down in the office. Tom's blue eyes gleamed.

"Like some coffee, Wimbie?"

"This is where I came in," Wimbie replied. "Yes, let's have some coffee and sit a minute, then let's go and have something stronger."

"They must have had a hot affair going once. But there was no fireplace to hold the heat. He'd built one for himself, though. He burned the manuscript in it."

"She must have talked a lot to him. I guess those two had more than one kind of intimacy going. But it must have turned pretty bitter."

"I suppose Matt would have said, 'You wouldn't want people

like the Kingsleys and banker Ecker to know your son was a killer, would you?'"

"So, he blackmailed her, and she finally threatened him with writing about it. 'And how would you like the townspeople to know how you got enough money to buy a new truck? That would make a good story.' And so on."

"I believe that kid," Tom said. "There's a kind of funny irony. Matt was blackmailing her because her kid was in jail for manslaughter. But it turns out that Matt was the killer, not the kid."

"We said she wasn't a squeaking wheel, but she was. Only it wasn't the fireplace she was squeaking about."

"She wasn't squeaking. She was going to squeal. Too bad she didn't do it while she was being killed. Somebody might have heard her."

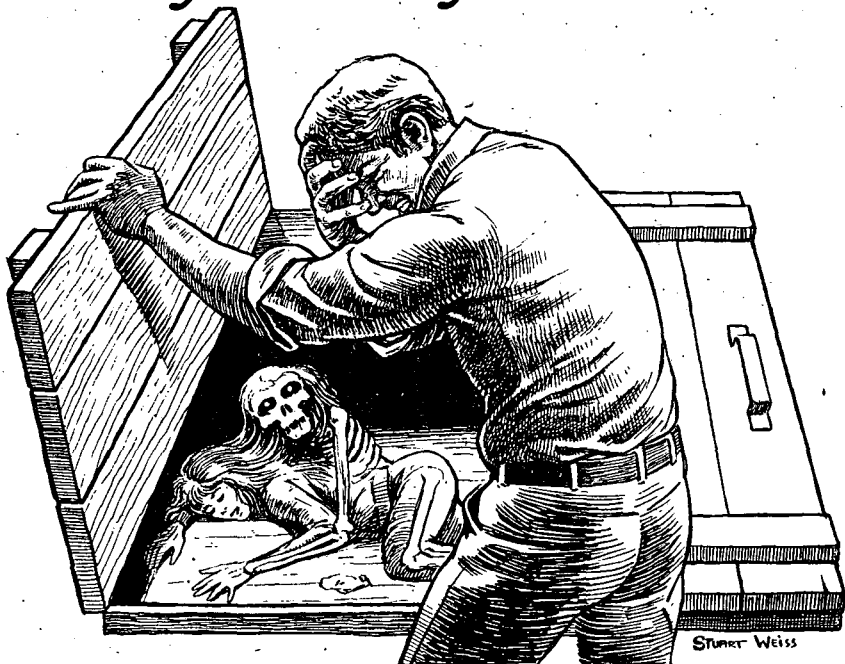
"He must have taken her in some hot embrace. She didn't know he was planning to bash her head against a rock. Anyway, squealing wouldn't have helped. He did a good job."

"We were barking up the wrong spruce. There was an obvious clue, and we missed it. The stone. She was killed by a stonemason with the stone he'd brought."

FICTION

A Thirst for Revenge

by Emory Smith



Murder is like any other problem, David Chester mused. You define your objective and decide how much you are willing to pay to reach it. The price is risk. He wanted Kathleen dead, but there was a limit to the amount of risk he was willing to take. Five percent was about right. If he could devise a plan involving no more than a five percent probability of detection, he

would do it. Later he revised this to two percent when the local paper ran a series of feature articles on the state prison system.

“Tom, get the targets. We’ll go on down to the shooting place,” David said.

“Okay, Dad.”

“Maybe I’d better go with him, Dad, just to make sure he

doesn't get locked in the cellar," said Janice, with a smile at her brother.

"Knock it off, sparrow brain," Tom said and stuck his tongue out. He ran toward the house.

David, Kathleen, and Janice walked down the hill from where they had parked, near the house, each carrying a .22 target rifle. They reached the spot where they could fire into a steep clay bank and began to load the little cartridges.

David loved this place, though he seldom came here any more. It was the remnant of the farm his grandfather and father had worked all their lives. Only sixty acres and the dilapidated old house remained. The land was mostly in permanent pasture, and David let a neighbor raise hay on halves; it brought enough to pay the taxes.

"We ought to get out here more often," Kathleen said.

David thought he detected a wistful note in her voice. Maybe she was thinking of the trips to the farm they had made in the early years, in those long-ago days of picnics and shooting and walking and, once, love-making in the gold fall leaves. In those times, before the bickering and quarreling and snarling, they had come out every week or two.

Tom trotted up with a shaft of targets.

"Well, I see you managed to get them without getting locked in," Janice said.

Tom hurled a clod of clay at her. "Shut up and help me pin the targets up." They took them to the bank and used twigs to fasten four of the sheets to the clay.

The old house was a ruin on the upper levels but the cellar was sound and was filled with generations of junk. They stored their targets there. Access to the underground chamber was through slanted cellar doors from the yard. The doors were secured by a two-by-four bolted to one door which could be dropped into a bracket on the other.

On their last trip Tom had gone into the cellar and let the door bang shut behind him. It had jarred the two-by-four, making it fall into the bracket and trapping him in the dark, musty room. The rest of the family were laying out lunch on a blanket down by the spring, and forty-five minutes passed before they began searching for him. He was on the verge of panic when they found him, and his mood had not been helped by his sister's derision.

"Top marksman from the last match starts the firing," David said. "Does anybody remember who won last time?"

"That's top marksperson and

I remember very well," Kathleen said.

The crisp breeze that flapped the collars of their windbreakers about their cheeks died as the morning progressed and the spring sun warmed them and seemed to soak the winter city-staleness from their bodies. It was cool enough to spread their picnic in the sun, and they basked as they ate. The children went for a ramble after lunch, and Kathleen took out her book and settled back against a stump to read. David took three of the discarded windbreakers and stuffed them into the fourth, fashioning himself a pillow. He settled back, shading his eyes with his forearm. Kathleen's long black hair hung straight, almost to the ground, screening her face. Smoke from her cigarette floated lazily into her hair.

David watched her and remembered with a sense of unreality the passion he had once felt for this woman. It had been mutual and had turned into mutual and equally fierce hatred. He didn't know how much more of it he could take, of the bitter fights when they were alone and the faked affection when the children were around. Divorce would be the logical answer except for the little consideration that it would ruin him. All his assets were

tied up in his business, a business which required a daily struggle to keep going but which, he was absolutely confident, would make him wealthy in a few years if he could only last. Kathleen would never accept promises for the future, in lieu of an immediate settlement, in a divorce. No, murder was the way, if he could only come up with a good plan.

He dozed off and was awakened by the children talking. They were back from their walk and were finishing off the food left over from lunch. Tom was fiddling with a spiral of copper tubing, bent, clogged with dirt at both ends, and stained almost black.

"Where did you get that, Tom?" David asked.

"I pulled it out of the ground by the creek over where it makes that turn in those maple trees. It was almost completely buried."

"Do you know what it is?"

"A piece of pipe."

"I'm pretty sure it's part of an old still."

"You mean a whisky still?"

"Yep. Bet you didn't know your granddaddy was a moonshiner, did you?"

Janice made a face, "Aw, Daddy, are you serious?"

"I sure am. He didn't make it to sell, you understand. He made it for his own personal

consumption and for his friends. Many's the time I heard Mother giving him down the country for it when I was a kid."

"Your grandfather was what is known as a character," Kathleen said to the children, "and that should be spelled with a capital C."

"Loved to play poker," David said. "Had a passion for it. When he couldn't find anybody to play with, it drove him up the wall. He used to give money to his hands just so he could win it back."

David laughed. "Mother caught him in a weak moment and got him to promise to give up moonshining and poker. I never did know how she did that, but Daddy was a man of his word and he broke up his still and threw out his cards. Then he took up winemaking and betting on horses, which was not exactly what Mother had in mind. Blackberries, blueberries, dandelion, wild cherries, muscadines, he made wine out of everything you can think of."

They had another round of shooting and packed up to go home. Tom was carrying the picnic basket and a rifle. David picked up the unused targets. "I'll put these in the cellar."

Tom had left the cellar door open. David descended the creaking steps and put the tar-

gets in their place on a dusty shelf. The cellar, after years of disuse, had a stale, lifeless smell he had not known as a child when it was a cool, spicy haven for play and exploration. He mounted the steps and dropped the heavy oak door into place. He pushed the two-by-four into its brackets. He stood staring at the door for a full minute, then walked slowly to the car, lips pursed.

David settled at the table and stared glumly at Kathleen as she put scrambled eggs, four rashers of bacon, and two pieces of toast on his plate. She shoved it in front of him with a clatter and began to fill her own plate.

"You going to put up vegetables this year?" he asked.

"Don't I always?"

She sounded like David felt. They were both suffering from battle fatigue. Tom was at Boy Scout camp and Janice was visiting her cousins in Cleveland. Free of interference; he and Kathleen had fought to the point of utter exhaustion.

"Oliver told me yesterday he had been by the Farmers Market. He said the corn and peas are coming in now. He said they were loaded down with tomatoes and okra, too."

"I guess I ought to get started on it. I'll have to buy some more

jars; most of mine are full of nuts and bolts and nails and screws and washers and everything else."

"I finally got all that stuff organized; I've been meaning to do it for years. But you don't need to buy any more. When we were out at the farm in the spring, I noticed a lot of old Mason jars in the cellar. There must be hundreds of them."

"I guess I ought to run out there and get some. We sure don't need to spend anything we don't have to."

"Don't start about the money again," he said as he got up and went to the stove for the coffee-pot.

"I'm not starting about anything."

He poured coffee for both of them. "When do you want me to buy the vegetables?"

"Tomorrow, I guess. I'll go to the farm this morning and wash the jars tonight."

He left for work a little earlier than usual. He stopped at a phone booth and called his assistant at home and caught him just as he was about to leave.

"Good morning, Philip. Glad I caught you. I don't know when I'll be in today. I have several things I have to take care of. George Anchor is due in at ten, you know what we want there; see what you can work out. Tell

him I'm sorry to have missed him and that I'll be in touch."

He drove to the farm and past the spot where they usually parked by the well. He drove down the rutted lane to the pasture. He got out of the car and opened the sagging gate and propped it with a stick. He drove through the gate and across the pasture. The first hay crop had recently been cut and the grass was still short. He parked the car in a small stand of poplar and oak in a shallow hollow.

He walked back to the edge of the pasture and closed the gate. He sat down and leaned against a tree trunk. He could see the lane leading to the farm and the back of the house. Everything was ready. He had come out several days earlier and removed all the tools from the cellar and made sure there was nothing in it with which to make a light. He plucked a blade of grass and chewed it slowly. Bees were working the honeysuckle on the fence and a bluejay scolded him from a low limb over his head. It was a fiercely bright day with the sun burning the land as it had every day for three rainless weeks. The air smelled dusty.

He watched the lane, feeling no impatience or anticipation. He seemed to be in suspended animation, hardly thinking at

all. Kathleen's dusty red Ford turned off the blacktop and into the lane. As it turned, it threw out a bright flash of reflected sunlight. "Here I come, here I come," the light shouted. He watched her drive up the lane and around the house. She parked in the usual spot by the well, under the massive hackberry tree. He had hoped she would pull up to the cellar door to shorten the distance she would have to carry the jars. But no matter. She got out of the car and walked to the cellar doors. He could see her from the shoulders up. She bent over at the doors and was out of sight; then he saw her head as she straightened.

When her head disappeared again, David jumped up and ran toward the house. He reached the yard and slowed to a walk. He went to the car and glanced in to make sure her purse was there. It would have been silly for her to have carried it into the cellar but he had seen her carry it into stranger places. It was on the front seat, so she would not have her lighter with her. He walked toward the cellar. He could hear her rummaging around among the boxes. He stopped at the top of the steps, his heart thumping loudly. He bent over and grasped the heavy door and pulled. It squeaked. Kathleen came to

the bottom of the stairs and looked up.

"David? What on earth are you doing here? You scared me to death."

He dropped the door shut and quickly slid the two-by-four into place.

"David, no. Don't do that! Open the door, David! That is not funny, David."

His legs felt too weak to hold him up, and he was having difficulty getting his breath.

"Open the door, dammit! It's dark in here. David, open the goddamn door right now!"

He turned and walked slowly to her car. He could hear her yelling faintly through the thick doors. He felt nauseated and leaned against the hackberry tree, fighting to keep from vomiting. Slowly the nausea subsided. Sweat covered his forehead and his palms. He got into the Ford and sat for several minutes before he felt strong enough to start it. He backed it up to the cellar doors. It was in the ell of the house now and out of sight unless someone came into the yard. He opened the trunk and left the keys hanging from the trunk lock. He walked down the lane and across the pasture to his own car. His research at the public library indicated she would probably be dead in three days, almost certainly in four. His job now was

to be the devoted husband driven to distraction by a missing wife.

“**B**reakfast is ready,” Janice called. David and Tom came into the kitchen. Three bowls and three spoons and three napkins and three glasses of orange juice were laid out. There was a twelve-pack of individual-serving cereal boxes, a half gallon carton of milk, and a bowl of sugar. They sat down and began to tear open the little boxes.

“We need to do something to get out of this rut,” David said. “We’ve done nothing for the last eight days but sit around and wait for the phone to ring.”

Janice looked horrified. “We can’t leave, Daddy; what if they call?”

“Honey, if the police call and nobody is here, they will call back. We need to get out of this house. What say we take the rifles out to the farm for a little shooting?”

“I don’t feel like it.”

“I don’t, either, but I think we should. We can pick up some hamburgers and soda for lunch. We need the air.”

David had thought a lot about how he should react when he drove around the farmhouse and Kathleen’s car came into view. He need not have wor-

ried. Tom and Janice were paying him no attention. They both yelled when they rounded the corner of the house and Tom was out of the car and running toward the cellar before the car stopped.

He got out and hurried to the cellar doors which Tom flung open. Kathleen was lying at the bottom of the stairs and Tom was on his knees beside her. Janice was halfway down the stairs. Tom turned. “Water, she says she wants water.”

“What!” David heard a roaring in his ears and felt dizzy. He stopped on the top step, swaying a little. Janice raced for the well. Tom put his arms under his mother and stood. He handled her as if she were weightless. He came up the steps and David stepped aside to let him pass. Tom laid Kathleen on the grass and sat with her head in his lap. Kathleen opened her eyes and looked at David and made a hoarse, croaking sound. Her haggard face was covered with dirt, her eyes sunken, the skin hung loosely under her chin. She closed her eyes.

Janice had pulled the bucket to the top of the well and now walked across the yard carefully, with a brimming dipper full of water. Tom raised his mother’s head and Janice knelt and helped her with the water.

She winced with the first swallow as if it were painful, and slowly emptied the dipper with small greedy gulps.

She tried to speak and produced another croak. She burped, cleared her throat, and whispered, "More."

Janice brought her three more dippers full. She dropped into sleep between each drink and had to be shaken awake. While the children held her up and helped her empty the dipper, she stared levelly at David.

"Let's move her into the shade," Tom said.

"No, no, please don't. Sun's wonderful. Maybe just one more drink." Her voice was improving but was still hoarse and low.

Janice went to the bucket and Kathleen looked at David and proffered a ghastly grin. "David, I'm glad to see you. I prayed and prayed just to get to see you again." Her tongue was black and looked absurdly small.

"We've got some hamburgers, Mom. I'll bet you're hungry," Tom said.

David spoke and his voice croaked as badly as Kathleen's had. He cleared his throat. "I don't think that's a good idea, Tom. She shouldn't start with solid food. She needs soup or something. Kathleen, honey, we'd better get you to the hos-

pital. They'll know what food to give you."

Kathleen dropped into sleep again. David bent to help Tom pick her up and almost jerked his hand away when he touched her arm. The skin hung loose and dry and was startlingly cold. They put her in the back seat of David's car. David went to the bucket of water by the well and drank three dippers full. Tom climbed out of the back seat where he had been helping his mother get comfortable.

David put his arm around Tom's shoulder and turned him away from the car. "I know you only have your learner's permit, but this is an emergency. You and Janice take Mom's car home. I'll take her to the hospital and call you as soon as I talk to the doctor. You be very careful now, and don't drive over fifty-five."

"Why don't we just follow you to the hospital?"

"I don't want you driving down there, there's too much traffic. You go on home, I'll call you."

"Come on, Janice," Tom said, and started toward the red Ford.

David got in his car. His hands were trembling and his mouth was dry despite the well water. He had another chance, one last chance. He had to do something between here and

the hospital. He had to think. Everything depended on the next hour. He fumbled with the keys and started the car, his mind racing furiously. She was very weak. Maybe—The door on the passenger side opened and Janice scrambled into the car.

"You go in the other car."

"Won't start," Janice said, sliding over to make room for Tom.

"Battery's dead, Dad. I guess the trunk light drained it, being on so long," Tom said as he slammed the door.

They started back to the city. Kathleen slept most of the way. She woke once and spoke Janice's name.

"Oh, Mom, it's awful to think of you in that cellar all this time," Janice said. "How did you even live, with nothing to drink?"

"Wine," Kathleen said hoarsely. "Blackberry wine. I found your granddaddy's hiding place and the wine he had on hand when he died. I've been drunk and nauseated and had the most awful cramps, but it kept me alive."

"Thank the Lord for Granddad's wine," Tom said.

"Yes, I do, but more than anything I thank him that I lived to see David again. I am most grateful for that." She laughed

and the sound sent chills down David's back. "I truly believe I wanted that more than I did water or food."

David watched, as in a dream, as an orderly trundled the rolling bed Kathleen lay on through double swinging doors and out of the emergency room reception area. He stood staring at the doors for a while and turned and walked to the water cooler. He had his third long drink since they had come into the hospital. He walked over to where Tom and Janice were sitting and sat down beside them. He bent over and put his elbows on his thighs and buried his face in his hands.

A doctor and a nurse came through the doors. The doctor was speaking. "... Severe ketosis and serious renal impairment. Keep her on the IV and take her temperature every hour. Prepare five hundred cc's of whole blood, but don't administer it until the lab gives us the actual acid levels."

"All right. What about the call? She wants us to call the police."

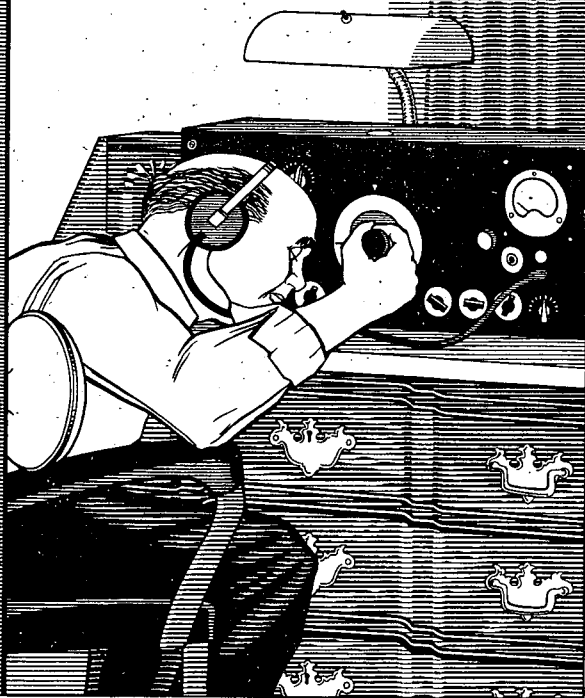
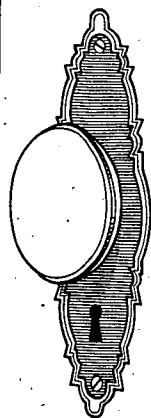
"I know, go ahead and call them, but we can't guarantee she will be conscious when they get here. She is going to be fading in and out for a while."

David got up and walked to the water fountain.

MYSTERY CLASSIC

Death on the Air

by Ngaio
Marsh



III

Illustration by Eric Marcus

120
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ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

On the 25th of December at seven thirty A.M. Mr. Septimus Tonks was found dead beside his wireless set.

It was Emily Parks, an underhousemaid, who discovered him. She butted open the door and entered, carrying mop, duster, and carpet sweeper. At that precise moment she was greatly startled by a voice that spoke out of the darkness.

"Good morning, everybody," said the voice in superbly inflected syllables, "and a Merry Christmas!"

Emily yelped, but not loudly, as she immediately realized what had happened. Mr. Tonks had omitted to turn off his wireless before going to bed. She drew back the curtains, revealing a kind of pale murk which was a London Christmas dawn, switched on the light, and saw Septimus.

He was seated in front of the radio. It was a small but expensive set, specially built for him. Septimus sat in an armchair, his back to Emily and his body tilted towards the wireless.

His hands, the fingers curiously bunched, were on the ledge of the cabinet under the tuning and volume knobs. His chest rested against the shelf below and his head leaned on the front panel.

He looked rather as though he was listening intently to the interior secrets of the wireless. His head was bent so that Emily could see the bald top with its trail of oiled hairs. He did not move.

"Beg pardon, sir," gasped Emily. She was again greatly startled. Mr. Tonks's enthusiasm for radio had never before induced him to tune in at seven thirty in the morning.

"Special Christmas service," the cultured voice was saying. Mr. Tonks sat very still. Emily, in common with the other servants, was terrified of her master. She did not know whether to go or to stay. She gazed wildly at Septimus and realized that he wore a dinner jacket. The room was now filled with the clamor of pealing bells.

Emily opened her mouth as wide as it would go and screamed and screamed and screamed. . . .

Chase, the butler, was the first to arrive. He was a pale, flabby man but authoritative. He said: "What's the meaning of this outrage?" and then saw Septimus. He went to the armchair, bent down, and looked into his master's face.

He did not lose his head, but said in a loud voice: "My Gawd!" And then to Emily: "Shut your face." By this vulgarism he betrayed his agitation. He seized Emily by the shoulders and thrust her towards the door, where they were met by Mr. Hislop, the

secretary, in his dressing gown. Mr. Hislop said: "Good heavens, Chase, what is the meaning—" and then his voice too was drowned in the clamor of bells and renewed screams.

Chase put his fat white hand over Emily's mouth.

"In the study if you please, sir. An accident. Go to your room, will you, and stop that noise or I'll give you something to make you." This to Emily, who bolted down the hall, where she was received by the rest of the staff who had congregated there.

Chase returned to the study with Mr. Hislop and locked the door. They both looked down at the body of Septimus Tonks. The secretary was the first to speak.

"But—but—he's dead," said little Mr. Hislop.

"I suppose there can't be any doubt," whispered Chase.

"Look at the face. Any doubt! My God!"

Mr. Hislop put out a delicate hand towards the bent head and then drew it back. Chase, less fastidious, touched one of the hard wrists, gripped, and then lifted it. The body at once tipped backwards as if it was made of wood. One of the hands knocked against the butler's face. He sprang back with an oath.

There lay Septimus, his knees and his hands in the air, his terrible face turned up to the light. Chase pointed to the right hand. Two fingers and the thumb were slightly blackened.

Ding, dong, dang, ding.

"For God's sake stop those bells," cried Mr. Hislop. Chase turned off the wall switch. Into the sudden silence came the sound of the door handle being rattled and Guy Tonks's voice on the other side.

"Hislop! Mr. Hislop! Chase! What's the matter?"

"Just a moment, Mr. Guy." Chase looked at the secretary. "You go, sir."

So it was left to Mr. Hislop to break the news to the family. They listened to his stammering revelation in stupefied silence. It was not until Guy, the eldest of the three children, stood in the study that any practical suggestion was made.

"What has killed him?" asked Guy.

"It's extraordinary," burred Hislop. "Extraordinary. He looks as if he'd been—"

"Galvanized," said Guy.

"We ought to send for a doctor," suggested Hislop timidly.

"Of course. Will you, Mr. Hislop? Dr. Meadows."

Hislop went to the telephone and Guy returned to his family. Dr. Meadows lived on the other side of the square and arrived in five minutes. He examined the body without moving it. He questioned

Chase and Hislop. Chase was very voluble about the burns on the hand. He uttered the word "electrocution" over and over again.

"I had a cousin, sir, that was struck by lightning. As soon as I saw the hand—"

"Yes, yes," said Dr. Meadows. "So you said. I can see the burns for myself."

"Electrocution," repeated Chase. "There'll have to be an inquest."

Dr. Meadows snapped at him, summoned Emily, and then saw the rest of the family—Guy, Arthur, Phillipa, and their mother. They were clustered round a cold grate in the drawing room. Phillipa was on her knees, trying to light the fire.

"What was it?" asked Arthur as soon as the doctor came in.

"Looks like electric shock. Guy, I'll have a word with you if you please. Phillipa, look after your mother, there's a good child. Coffee with a dash of brandy. Where are those damn maids? Come on, Guy."

Alone with Guy, he said they'd have to send for the police.

"The police!" Guy's dark face turned very pale. "Why? What's it got to do with them?"

"Nothing, as like as not, but they'll have to be notified. I can't give a certificate as things are. If it's electrocution, how did it happen?"

"But the police!" said Guy. "That's simply ghastly. Dr. Meadows, for God's sake, couldn't you—?"

"No," said Dr. Meadows, "I couldn't. Sorry, Guy, but there it is."

"But can't we wait a moment? Look at him again. You haven't examined him properly."

"I don't want to move him, that's why. Pull yourself together, boy. Look here. I've got a pal in the C.I.D.—Alleyn. He's a gentleman and all that. He'll curse me like a fury, but he'll come if he's in London, and he'll make things easier for you. Go back to your mother. I'll ring Alleyn up."

That was how it came about that Chief Detective-Inspector Roderick Alleyn spent his Christmas Day in harness. As a matter of fact he was on duty and, as he pointed out to Dr. Meadows, would have had to turn out and visit his miserable Tonkses in any case. When he did arrive it was with his usual air of remote courtesy. He was accompanied by a tall, thickset officer—Inspector Fox—and by the divisional police surgeon. Dr. Meadows took them into the study. Alleyn, in his turn, looked at the horror that had been Septimus.

"Was he like this when he was found?"

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"No. I understand he was leaning forward with his hands on the ledge of the cabinet. He must have slumped forward and been propped up by the chair arms and the cabinet."

"Who moved him?"

"Chase, the butler. He said he only meant to raise the arm. Rigor is well established."

Alleyn put his hand behind the rigid neck and pushed. The body fell forward into its original position.

"There you are, Curtis," said Alleyn to the divisional surgeon. He turned to Fox. "Get the cameraman, will you, Fox?"

The photographer took four shots and departed. Alleyn marked the position of the hands and feet with chalk, made a careful plan of the room, and then turned to the doctors.

"Is it electrocution, do you think?"

"Looks like it," said Curtis. "Have to be a P.M., of course."

"Of course. Still, look at the hands. Burns. Thumb and two fingers bunched together and exactly the distance between the two knobs apart. He'd been tuning his hurdy-gurdy."

"By gum," said Inspector Fox, speaking for the first time.

"D'you mean he got a lethal shock from his radio?" asked Dr. Meadows.

"I don't know. I merely conclude he had his hands on the knobs when he died."

"It was still going when the housemaid found him. Chase turned it off and got no shock."

"Yours, partner," said Alleyn, turning to Fox. Fox stooped down to the wall switch.

"Careful," said Alleyn.

"I've got rubber soles," said Fox, and switched it on. The radio hummed, gathered volume, and found itself.

"No-o-el, No-o-el," it roared. Fox cut it off and pulled out the wall plug.

"I'd like to have a look inside this set," he said.

"So you shall, old boy, so you shall," rejoined Alleyn. "Before you begin, I think we'd better move the body. Will you see to that, Meadows? Fox, get Bailey, will you? He's out in the car."

Curtis, Hislop, and Meadows carried Septimus Tonks into a spare downstairs room. It was a difficult and horrible business with that contorted body. Dr. Meadows came back alone, mopping his brow, to find Detective-Sergeant Bailey, a fingerprint expert, at work on the wireless cabinet.

"What's all this?" asked Dr. Meadows. "Do you want to find out if he'd been fooling around with the innards?"

"He," said Alleyn, "or—somebody else."

"Umph!" Dr. Meadows looked at the inspector. "You agree with me, it seems. Do you suspect—?"

"Suspect? I'm the least suspicious man alive. I'm merely being tidy. Well, Bailey?"

"I've got a good one off the chair arm. That'll be the deceased's, won't it, sir?"

"No doubt. We'll check up later. What about the wireless?"

Fox, wearing a glove, pulled off the knob of the volume control.

"Seems to be okay," said Bailey. "It's a sweet bit of work. Not too bad at all, sir." He turned his torch into the back of the radio, undid a couple of screws underneath the set, and lifted out the works.

"What's the little hole for?" asked Alleyn.

"What's that, sir?" said Fox.

"There's a hole bored through the panel above the knob. About an eighth of an inch in diameter. The rim of the knob hides it. One might easily miss it. Move your torch, Bailey. Yes. There, do you see?"

Fox bent down and uttered a bass growl. A fine needle of light came through the front of the radio.

"That's peculiar, sir," said Bailey from the other side. "I don't get the idea at all."

Alleyn pulled out the tuning knob.

"There's another one there," he murmured. "Yes. Nice clean little holes. Newly bored. Unusual, I take it?"

"Unusual's the word, sir," said Fox.

"Run away, Meadows," said Alleyn.

"Why the devil?" asked Dr. Meadows indignantly. "What are you driving at? Why shouldn't I be here?"

"You ought to be with the sorrowing relatives. Where's your corpse-side manner?"

"I've settled them. What are you up to?"

"Who's being suspicious now?" asked Alleyn mildly. "You may stay for a moment. Tell me about the Tonkses. Who are they? What are they? What sort of a man was Septimus?"

"If you must know, he was a damned unpleasant sort of a man."

"Tell me about him."

Dr. Meadows sat down and lit a cigarette.

"He was a self-made bloke," he said, "as hard as nails and—well, coarse rather than vulgar."

"Like Dr. Johnson perhaps?"

"Not in the least. Don't interrupt. I've known him for twenty-five years. His wife was a neighbor of ours in Dorset. Isabel Foreston. I brought the children into this vale of tears and, by jove, in many ways it's been one for them. It's an extraordinary household. For the last ten years Isabel's condition has been the sort that sends these psycho-jokers dizzy with rapture. I'm only an out-of-date G.P., and I'd just say she is in an advanced stage of hysterical neurosis. Frightened into fits of her husband."

"I can't understand these holes," grumbled Fox to Bailey.

"Go on, Meadows," said Alleyn.

"I tackled Sep about her eighteen months ago. Told him the trouble was in her mind. He eyed me with a sort of grin on his face and said: 'I'm surprised to learn that my wife has enough mentality to—' But look here, Alleyn, I can't talk about my patients like this. What the devil am I thinking about."

"You know perfectly well it'll go no further unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless it has to. Do go on."

But Dr. Meadows hurriedly withdrew behind his professional rectitude. All he would say was that Mr. Tonks had suffered from high blood pressure and a weak heart, that Guy was in his father's city office, that Arthur had wanted to study art and had been told to read for law, and that Phillipa wanted to go on the stage and had been told to do nothing of the sort.

"Bullied his children," commented Alleyn.

"Find out for yourself. I'm off." Dr. Meadows got as far as the door and came back.

"Look here," he said, "I'll tell you one thing. There was a row here last night. I'd asked Hislop, who's a sensible little beggar, to let me know if anything happened to upset Mrs. Sep. Upset her badly, you know. To be indiscreet again, I said he'd better let me know if Sep cut up rough because Isabel and the young people had had about as much of that as they could stand. He was drinking pretty heavily. Hislop rang me up at ten twenty last night to say there'd been a hell of a row; Sep bullying Phips—Phillipa, you know, always call her Phips—in her room. He said Isabel—Mrs. Sep—had gone to bed. I'd had a big day and I didn't want to turn out. I told him to ring again in half an hour if things hadn't quieted

down. I told him to keep out of Sep's way and stay in his own room, which is next to Phips's, and see if she was all right when Sep cleared out. Hislop was involved. I won't tell you how. The servants were all out. I said that if I didn't hear from him in half an hour I'd ring again, and if there was no answer I'd know they were all in bed and quiet. I did ring, got no answer, and went to bed myself. That's all. I'm off. Curtis knows where to find me. You'll want me for the inquest, I suppose. Goodbye."

When he had gone, Alleyn embarked on a systematic prowling round the room. Fox and Bailey were still deeply engrossed with the wireless.

"I don't see how the gentleman could have got a bump-off from the instrument," grumbled Fox. "These control knobs are quite in order. Everything's as it should be. Look here, sir."

He turned on the wall switch and tuned in. There was a prolonged humming.

"... concludes the program of Christmas carols," said the radio.

"A very nice tone," said Fox approvingly.

"Here's something, sir," announced Bailey suddenly.

"Found the sawdust, have you?" said Alleyn.

"Got it in one," said the startled Bailey.

Alleyn peered into the instrument, using the torch. He scooped up two tiny traces of sawdust from under the holes.

"Vantage number one," said Alleyn. He bent down to the wall plug. "Hullo! A two-way adapter. Serves the radio and the radiator. Thought they were illegal. This is a rum business. Let's have another look at those knobs."

He had his look. They were the usual wireless fittings, Bakelite knobs fitting snugly to the steel shafts that projected from the front panel.

"As you say," he murmured, "quite in order. Wait a bit." He produced a pocket lens and squinted at one of the shafts. "Ye-es. Do they ever wrap blotting paper round these objects, Fox?"

"Blotting paper!" ejaculated Fox. "They do not."

Alleyn scraped at both the shafts with his penknife, holding an envelope underneath. He rose, groaning, and crossed to the desk. "A corner torn off the bottom bit of blotch," he said presently. "No prints on the wireless, I think you said, Bailey?"

"That's right," agreed Bailey morosely.

"There'll be none, or too many, on the blotter, but try, Bailey, try," said Alleyn. He wandered about the room, his eyes on the

floor; got as far as the window and stopped.

"Fox!" he said. "A clue. A very palpable clue."

"What is it?" asked Fox.

"The odd wisp of blotting paper, no less." Alleyn's gaze traveled up the side of the window curtain. "Can I believe my eyes?"

He got a chair, stood on the seat, and with his gloved hand pulled the buttons from the ends of the curtain rods.

"Look at this." He turned to the radio, detached the control knobs, and laid them beside the ones he had removed from the curtain rod.

Ten minutes later Inspector Fox knocked on the drawing room door and was admitted by Guy Tonks. Phillipa had got the fire going, and the family was gathered round it. They looked as though they had not moved or spoken to one another for a long time.

It was Phillipa who spoke first to Fox. "Do you want one of us?" she asked.

"If you please, miss," said Fox. "Inspector Alleyn would like to see Mr. Guy Tonks for a moment, if convenient."

"I'll come," said Guy, and led the way to the study. At the door he paused. "Is he—my father—still—?"

"No, no, sir," said Fox comfortably. "It's all shipshape in there again."

With a lift of his chin Guy opened the door and went in, followed by Fox. Alleyn was alone, seated at the desk. He rose to his feet.

"You want to speak to me?" asked Guy.

"Yes, if I may. This has all been a great shock to you, of course. Won't you sit down?"

Guy sat in the chair farthest away from the radio.

"What killed my father? Was it a stroke?"

"The doctors are not quite certain. There will have to be a post-mortem."

"Good God! And an inquest?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Horrible!" said Guy violently. "What do they think was the matter? Why the devil do these quacks have to be so mysterious? What killed him?"

"They think an electric shock."

"How did it happen?"

"We don't know. It looks as if he got it from the wireless."

"Surely that's impossible. I thought they were foolproof."

"I believe they are, if left to themselves."

For a second undoubtedly Guy was startled. Then a look of relief came into his eyes. He seemed to relax all over.

"Of course," he said, "he was always monkeying about with it. What had he done?"

"Nothing."

"But you said—if it killed him he must have done something to it."

"If anything interfered with the set, it was put right afterwards."

Guy's lips parted but he did not speak. He had gone very white.

"So you see," said Alleyn, "your father could not have done anything."

"Then it was not the radio that killed him."

"That we hope will be determined by the post-mortem."

"I don't know anything about wireless," said Guy suddenly. "I don't understand. This doesn't seem to make sense. Nobody ever touched the thing except my father. He was most particular about it. Nobody went near the wireless."

"I see. He was an enthusiast?"

"Yes, it was his only enthusiasm except—except his business."

"One of my men is a bit of an expert," Alleyn said. "He says this is a remarkably good set. You are not an expert, you say. Is there anyone in the house who is?"

"My young brother was interested at one time. He's given it up. My father wouldn't allow another radio in the house."

"Perhaps he may be able to suggest something."

"But if the thing's all right now—"

"We've got to explore every possibility."

"You speak as if—as—if—"

"I speak as I am bound to speak before there has been an inquest," said Alleyn. "Had anyone a grudge against your father, Mr. Tonks?"

Up went Guy's chin again. He looked Alleyn squarely in the eyes.

"Almost everyone who knew him," said Guy.

"Is that an exaggeration?"

"No. You think he was murdered, don't you?"

Alleyn suddenly pointed to the desk beside him.

"Have you ever seen those before?" he asked abruptly. Guy stared at two black knobs that lay side by side on an ashtray.

"Those?" he said. "No. What are they?"

"I believe they are the agents of your father's death."

The study door opened and Arthur Tonks came in.

"Guy," he said, "what's happening? We can't stay cooped up together all day. I can't stand it. For God's sake, what happened to him?"

"They think those things killed him," said Guy.

"Those?" For a split second Arthur's glance slewed to the curtain rods. Then, with a characteristic flicker of his eyelids, he looked away again.

"What do you mean?" he asked Alleyn.

"Will you try one of those knobs on the shaft of the volume control?"

"But," said Arthur, "they're metal."

"It's disconnected," said Alleyn.

Arthur picked one of the knobs from the tray, turned to the radio, and fitted the knob over one of the exposed shafts.

"It's too loose," he said quickly, "it would fall off."

"Not if it was packed—with blotting paper, for instance."

"Where did you find these things?" demanded Arthur.

"I think you recognized them, didn't you? I saw you glance at the curtain rod."

"Of course I recognized them. I did a portrait of Phillipa against those curtains when—he—was away last year. I've painted the damn things."

"Look here," interrupted Guy, "exactly what are you driving at, Mr. Alleyn? If you mean to suggest that my brother—"

"I!" cried Arthur. "What's it got to do with me? Why should you suppose—"

"I found traces of blotting paper on the shafts and inside the metal knobs," said Alleyn. "It suggested a substitution of the metal knobs for the Bakelite ones. It is remarkable, don't you think, that they should so closely resemble one another? If you examine them, of course, you find they are not identical. Still, the difference is scarcely perceptible."

Arthur did not answer this. He was still looking at the wireless.

"I've always wanted to have a look at this set," he said surprisingly.

"You are free to do so now," said Alleyn politely. "We have finished with it for the time being."

"Look here," said Arthur suddenly, "suppose metal knobs were substituted for Bakelite ones, it couldn't kill him. He wouldn't get

a shock at all. Both the controls are grounded."

"Have you noticed those very small holes drilled through the panel?" asked Alleyn. "Should they be there, do you think?"

Arthur peered at the little steel shafts. "By God, he's right, Guy," he said. "That's how it was done."

"Inspector Fox," said Alleyn, "tells me those holes could be used for conducting wires and that a lead could be taken from the—the transformer, is it?—to one of the knobs."

"And the other connected to earth," said Fox. "It's a job for an expert. He could get three hundred volts or so that way."

"That's not good enough," said Arthur quickly; "there wouldn't be enough current to do any damage—only a few hundredths of an amp."

"I'm not an expert," said Alleyn, "but I'm sure you're right. Why were the holes drilled, then? Do you imagine someone wanted to play a practical joke on your father?"

"A practical joke? On *him*?" Arthur gave an unpleasant screech of laughter. "Do you hear that, Guy?"

"Shut up," said Guy. "After all, he is dead."

"It seems almost too good to be true, doesn't it?"

"Don't be a bloody fool, Arthur. Pull yourself together. Can't you see what this means? They think he's been murdered."

"Murdered! They're wrong. None of us had the nerve for that, Mr. Inspector. Look at me. My hands are so shaky they told me I'd never be able to paint. That dates from when I was a kid and he shut me up in the cellars for a night. Look at me. Look at Guy. He's not so vulnerable, but he caved in like the rest of us. We were conditioned to surrender. Do you know—"

"Wait a moment," said Alleyn quietly. "Your brother is quite right, you know. You'd better think before you speak. This may be a case of homicide."

"Thank you, sir," said Guy quickly. "That's extraordinarily decent of you. Arthur's a bit above himself. It's a shock."

"The relief, you mean," said Arthur. "Don't be such an ass. I didn't kill him and they'll find it out soon enough. Nobody killed him. There must be some explanation."

"I suggest that you listen to me," said Alleyn. "I'm going to put several questions to both of you. You need not answer them, but it will be more sensible to do so. I understand no one but your father touched this radio. Did any of you ever come into this room while it was in use?"

"Not unless he wanted to vary the program with a little bullying," said Arthur.

Alleyn turned to Guy, who was glaring at his brother.

"I want to know exactly what happened in this house last night. As far as the doctors can tell us, your father died not less than three and not more than eight hours before he was found. We must try to fix the time as accurately as possible."

"I saw him at about a quarter to nine," began Guy slowly. "I was going out to a supper party at the Savoy and had come downstairs. He was crossing the hall from the drawing room to his room."

"Did you see him after a quarter to nine, Mr. Arthur?"

"No. I heard him, though. He was working in here with Hislop. Hislop had asked to go away for Christmas. Quite enough. My father discovered some urgent correspondence. Really, Guy, you know, he was pathological. I'm sure Dr. Meadows thinks so."

"When did you hear him?" asked Alleyn.

"Some time after Guy had gone, I was working on a drawing in my room upstairs. It's above his. I heard him bawling at little Hislop. It must have been before ten o'clock because I went out to a studio party at ten. I heard him bawling as I crossed the hall."

"And when," said Alleyn, "did you both return?"

"I came home at about twenty past twelve," said Guy immediately. "I can fix the time because we had gone on to Chez Carlo, and they had a midnight stunt there. We left immediately afterwards. I came home in a taxi. The radio was on full blast."

"You heard no voices?"

"None. Just the wireless."

"And you, Mr. Arthur?"

"Lord knows when I got in. After one. The house was in darkness. Not a sound."

"You had your own key?"

"Yes," said Guy. "Each of us has one. They're always left on a hook in the lobby. When I came in, I noticed Arthur's was gone."

"What about the others? How did you know it was his?"

"Mother hasn't got one and Phips lost hers weeks ago. Anyway, I knew they were staying in and that it must be Arthur who was out."

"Thank you," said Arthur ironically.

"You didn't look in the study when you came in?" Alleyn asked him.

"Good Lord, no," said Arthur as if the suggestion was fantastic.

"I say," he said suddenly, "I suppose he was sitting here—dead. That's a queer thought." He laughed nervously. "Just sitting here, behind the door in the dark."

"How do you know it was in the dark?"

"What d'you mean? Of course it was. There was no light under the door."

"I see. Now do you two mind joining your mother again? Perhaps your sister will be kind enough to come in here for a moment. Fox, ask her, will you?"

Fox returned to the drawing room with Guy and Arthur and remained there, blandly unconscious of any embarrassment his presence might cause the Tonkses. Bailey was already there, ostensibly examining the electric points.

Phillipa went to the study at once. Her first remark was characteristic. "Can I be of any help?" asked Phillipa.

"It's extremely nice of you to put it like that," said Alleyn. "I don't want to worry you for long. I'm sure this discovery has been a shock to you."

"Probably," said Phillipa. Alleyn glanced quickly at her. "I mean," she explained, "that I suppose I must be shocked, but I can't feel anything much. I just want to get it all over as soon as possible. And then think. Please tell me what has happened."

Alleyn told her they believed her father had been electrocuted and that the circumstances were unusual and puzzling. He said nothing to suggest that the police suspected murder.

"I don't think I'll be much help," said Phillipa, "but go ahead."

"I want to try to discover who was the last person to see your father or speak to him."

"I should think very likely I was," said Phillipa composedly. "I had a row with him before I went to bed."

"What about?"

"I don't see that it matters."

Alleyn considered this. When he spoke again it was with deliberation.

"Look here," he said, "I think there is very little doubt that your father was killed by an electric shock from his wireless set. As far as I know, the circumstances are unique. Radios are normally incapable of giving a lethal shock to anyone. We have examined the cabinet and are inclined to think that its internal arrangements were disturbed last night. Very radically disturbed. Your father may have experimented with it. If anything happened to interrupt

or upset him, it is possible that in the excitement of the moment he made some dangerous readjustment."

"You don't believe that, do you?" asked Phillipa calmly.

"Since you ask me," said Alleyn, "no."

"I see," said Phillipa; "you think he was murdered, but you're not sure." She had gone very white, but she spoke crisply. "Naturally you want to find out about my row."

"About everything that happened last evening," amended Alleyn.

"What happened was this," said Phillipa; "I came into the hall some time after ten. I'd heard Arthur go out and had looked at the clock at five past. I ran into my father's secretary, Richard Hislop. He turned aside, but not before I saw . . . not quickly enough. I blurted out: 'You're crying.' We looked at each other. I asked him why he stood it. None of the other secretaries could. He said he had to. He's a widower with two children. There have been doctor's bills and things. I needn't tell you about his . . . about his damnable servitude to my father nor about the refinements of cruelty he'd had to put up with. I think my father was mad, really mad, I mean. Richard gabbled it all out to me higgledy-piggledy in a sort of horrified whisper. He's been here two years, but I'd never realized until that moment that we . . . that . . ." A faint flush came into her cheeks. "He's such a funny little man. Not at all the sort I've always thought . . . not good-looking or exciting or anything."

She stopped, looking bewildered.

"Yes?" said Alleyn.

"Well, you see—I suddenly realized I was in love with him. He realized it, too. He said: 'Of course, it's quite hopeless, you know. Us, I mean. Laughable, almost.' Then I put my arms around his neck and kissed him. It was very odd, but it seemed quite natural. The point is my father came out of the room into the hall and saw us."

"That was bad luck," said Alleyn.

"Yes, it was. My father really seemed delighted. He almost licked his lips. Richard's efficiency had irritated my father for a long time. It was difficult to find excuses for being beastly to him. Now, of course . . . He ordered Richard to the study and me to my room. He followed me upstairs. Richard tried to come, too, but I asked him not to. My father . . . I needn't tell you what he said. He put the worst possible construction on what he'd seen. He was absolutely foul, screaming at me like a madman. He was insane. Per-

haps it was D.T.'s. He drank terribly, you know. I dare say it's silly of me to tell you all this."

"No," said Alleyn.

"I can't feel anything at all. Not even relief. The boys are frankly relieved. I can't feel afraid, either." She stared meditatively at Alleyn. "Innocent people needn't feel afraid, need they?"

"It's an axiom of police investigation," said Alleyn and wondered if indeed she was innocent.

"It just *can't* be murder," said Phillipa. "We were all too much afraid to kill him. I believe he'd win even if you murdered him. He'd hit back somehow." She put her hands to her eyes. "I'm all muddled," she said.

"I think you are more upset than you realize. I'll be as quick as I can. Your father made this scene in your room. You say he screamed. Did anyone hear him?"

"Yes, Mummy did. She came in."

"What happened?"

"I said: 'Go away, darling, it's all right.' I didn't want her to be involved. He nearly killed her with the things he did. Sometimes he'd . . . we never knew what happened between them. It was all secret, like a door shutting quietly as you walk along a passage."

"Did she go away?"

"Not at once. He told her he'd found out that Richard and I were lovers. He said . . . it doesn't matter. I don't want to tell you. She was terrified. He was stabbing at her in some way I couldn't understand. Then, quite suddenly, he told her to go to her own room. She went at once and he followed her. He locked me in. That's the last I saw of him, but I heard him go downstairs later."

"Were you locked in all night?"

"No. Richard Hislop's room is next to mine. He came up and spoke through the wall to me. He wanted to unlock the door, but I said better not in case—he—came back. Then, much later, Guy came home. As he passed my door I tapped on it. The key was in the lock and he turned it."

"Did you tell him what had happened?"

"Just that there'd been a row. He only stayed a moment."

"Can you hear the radio from your room?"

She seemed surprised.

"The wireless? Why, yes. Faintly."

"Did you hear it after your father returned to the study?"

"I don't remember."

"Think. While you lay awake all that long time until your brother came home?"

"I'll try. When he came out and found Richard and me, it was not going. They had been working, you see. No, I can't remember hearing it at all unless—wait a moment. Yes. After he had gone back to the study from Mother's room, I remember there was a loud crash of static. Very loud. Then I think it was quiet for some time. I fancy I heard it again later. Oh, I've remembered something else. After the static my bedside radiator went out. I suppose there was something wrong with the electric supply. That would account for both, wouldn't it? The heater went on again about ten minutes later."

"And did the radio begin again then, do you think?"

"I don't know. I'm very vague about that. It started again sometime before I went to sleep."

"Thank you very much indeed. I won't bother you any longer now."

"All right," said Phillipa calmly, and went away.

Alleyn sent for Chase and questioned him about the rest of the staff and about the discovery of the body. Emily was summoned and dealt with. When she departed, awestruck but complacent, Alleyn turned to the butler. "Chase," he said, "had your master any peculiar habits?"

"Yes, sir."

"In regard to his use of the wireless?"

"I beg pardon, sir. I thought you meant generally speaking."

"Well, then, generally speaking."

"If I may say so, sir, he was a mass of them."

"How long have you been with him?"

"Two months, sir, and due to leave at the end of the week."

"Oh. Why are you leaving?"

Chase produced the classic remark of his kind.

"There are some things," he said, "that flesh and blood will not stand, sir. One of them's being spoke to like Mr. Tonks spoke to his staff."

"Ah. His peculiar habits, in fact?"

"It's my opinion, sir, he was mad. Stark, staring."

"With regard to the radio. Did he tinker with it?"

"I can't say I've ever noticed, sir. I believe he knew quite a lot about wireless."

"When he tuned the thing, had he any particular method? Any

characteristic attitude or gesture?"

"I don't think so, sir. I never noticed, and yet I've often come into the room when he was at it. I can seem to see him now, sir."

"Yes, yes," said Alleyn swiftly. "That's what we want. A clear, mental picture. How was it now? Like this?"

In a moment he was across the room and seated in Septimus's chair. He swung round to the cabinet and raised his right hand to the tuning control.

"Like this?"

"No, sir," said Chase promptly, "that's not him at all. Both hands it should be."

"Ah." Up went Alleyn's left hand to the volume control. "More like this?"

"Yes, sir," said Chase slowly. "But there's something else and I can't recollect what it was. Something he was always doing. It's in the back of my head. You know, sir. Just on the edge of my memory, as you might say."

"I know."

"It's a kind—something—to do with irritation," said Chase slowly.

"Irritation? His?"

"No. It's no good, sir. I can't get it."

"Perhaps later. Now look here, Chase, what happened to all of you last night? All the servants, I mean."

"We were all out, sir. It being Christmas Eve. The mistress sent for me yesterday morning. She said we could take the evening off as soon as I had taken in Mr. Tonks's grog tray at nine o'clock. So we went," ended Chase simply.

"When?"

"The rest of the staff got away about nine. I left at ten past, sir, and returned about eleven twenty. The others were back then, and all in bed. I went straight to bed myself, sir."

"You came in by a back door, I suppose?"

"Yes, sir. We've been talking it over. None of us noticed anything unusual."

"Can you hear the wireless in your part of the house?"

"No, sir."

"Well," said Alleyn, looking up from his notes, "that'll do, thank you."

Before Chase reached the door, Fox came in.

"Beg pardon, sir," said Fox, "I just want to take a look at the

Radio Times on the desk."

He bent over the paper, wetted a gigantic thumb, and turned a page.

"That's it, sir," shouted Chase suddenly. "That's what I tried to think of. That's what he was always doing."

"But what?"

"Licking his fingers, sir. It was a habit," said Chase. "That's what he always did when he sat down to the radio. I heard Mr. Hislop tell the doctor it nearly drove him demented, the way the master couldn't touch a thing without first licking his fingers."

"Quite so," said Alleyn. "In about ten minutes, ask Mr. Hislop if he will be good enough to come in for a moment. That will be all, thank you, Chase."

"Well, sir," remarked Fox when Chase had gone, "if that's the case and what I think's right, it'd certainly make matters worse."

"Good heavens, Fox, what an elaborate remark. What does it mean?"

"If metal knobs were substituted for Bakelite ones and fine wires brought through those holes to make contact, then he'd get a bigger bump if he tuned it with *damp* fingers."

"Yes. And he always used both hands. Fox!"

"Sir."

"Approach the Tonkses again. You haven't left them alone, of course?"

"Bailey's in there making out he's interested in the light switches. He's found the main switchboard under the stairs. There's signs of a blown fuse having been fixed recently. In a cupboard underneath there are odd lengths of flex and so on. Same brand as this on the wireless and the heater."

"Ah, yes. Could the cord from the adapter to the radiator be brought into play?"

"By gum," said Fox, "you're right! That's how it was done, chief. The heavier flex was cut away from the radiator and shoved through. There was a fire, so he wouldn't want the radiator and wouldn't notice."

"It might have been done that way, certainly, but there's little to prove it. Return to the bereaved Tonkses, my Fox, and ask prettily if any of them remember Septimus's peculiarities when tuning his wireless."

Fox met little Mr. Hislop at the door and left him alone with Alleyn. Phillipa had been right, reflected the inspector, when she

said Richard Hislop was not a noticeable man. He was nondescript. Grey eyes, drab hair; rather pale, rather short, rather insignificant; and yet last night there had flashed up between those two the realization of love. Romantic but rum, thought Alleyn.

"Do sit down," he said. "I want you, if you will, to tell me what happened between you and Mr. Tonks last evening."

"What happened?"

"Yes. You all dined at eight, I understand. Then you and Mr. Tonks came in here?"

"Yes."

"What did you do?"

"He dictated several letters."

"Anything unusual take place?"

"Oh, no."

"Why did you quarrel?"

"Quarrel!" The quiet voice jumped a tone. "We did not quarrel, Mr. Alleyn."

"Perhaps that was the wrong word. What upset you?"

"Phillipa has told you?"

"Yes. She was wise to do so. What was the matter, Mr. Hislop?"

"Apart from the . . . what she told you . . . Mr. Tonks was a difficult man to please. I often irritated him. I did so last night."

"In what way?"

"In almost every way. He shouted at me. I was startled and nervous, clumsy with papers, and making mistakes. I wasn't well. I blundered and then . . . I . . . I broke down. I have always irritated him. My very mannerisms—"

"Had he no irritating mannerisms, himself?"

"He! My God!"

"What were they?"

"I can't think of anything in particular. It doesn't matter, does it?"

"Anything to do with the wireless, for instance?"

There was a short silence.

"No," said Hislop.

"Was the radio on in here last night, after dinner?"

"For a little while. Not after—after the incident in the hall. At least, I don't think so. I don't remember."

"What did you do after Miss Phillipa and her father had gone upstairs?"

"I followed and listened outside the door for a moment." He had

gone very white and had backed away from the desk.

"And then?"

"I heard someone coming. I remembered Dr. Meadows had told me to ring him up if there was one of the scenes. I returned here and rang him up. He told me to go to my room and listen. If things got any worse, I was to telephone again. Otherwise I was to stay in my room. It is next to hers."

"And you did this?" He nodded. "Could you hear what Mr. Tonks said to her?"

"A—a good deal of it."

"What did you hear?"

"He insulted her. Mrs. Tonks was there. I was just thinking of ringing Dr. Meadows up again when she and Mr. Tonks came out and went along the passage. I stayed in my room."

"You did not try to speak to Miss Phillipa?"

"We spoke through the wall. She asked me not to ring Dr. Meadows, but to stay in my room. In a little while, perhaps it was as much as twenty minutes—I really don't know—I heard him come back and go downstairs. I again spoke to Phillipa. She implored me not to do anything and said that she herself would speak to Dr. Meadows in the morning. So I waited a little longer and then went to bed."

"And to sleep?"

"My God, no!"

"Did you hear the wireless again?"

"Yes. At least I heard static."

"Are you an expert on wireless?"

"No. I know the ordinary things. Nothing much."

"How did you come to take this job, Mr. Hislop?"

"I answered an advertisement."

"You are sure you don't remember any particular mannerism of Mr. Tonks's in connection with the radio?"

"No."

"And you can tell me no more about your interview in the study that led to the scene in the hall?"

"No."

"Will you please ask Mrs. Tonks if she will be kind enough to speak to me for a moment?"

"Certainly," said Hislop, and went away.

Septimus's wife came in looking like death. Alleyn got her to sit down and asked her about her movements on the preceding eve-

ning. She said she was feeling unwell and dined in her room. She went to bed immediately afterwards. She heard Septimus yelling at Phillipa and went to Phillipa's room. Septimus accused Mr. Hislop and her daughter of "terrible things." She got as far as this and then broke down quietly. Alleyn was very gentle with her. After a little while he learned that Septimus had gone to her room with her and had continued to speak of "terrible things."

"What sort of things?" asked Alleyn.

"He was not responsible," said Isabel. "He did not know what he was saying. I think he had been drinking."

She thought he had remained with her for perhaps a quarter of an hour. Possibly longer. He left her abruptly and she heard him go along the passage, past Phillipa's door, and presumably downstairs. She had stayed awake for a long time. The wireless could not be heard from her room. Alleyn showed her the curtain knobs, but she seemed quite unable to take in their significance. He let her go, summoned Fox, and went over the whole case.

"What's your idea on the show?" he asked when he had finished.

"Well, sir," said Fox, in his stolid way, "on the face of it the young gentlemen have got alibis. We'll have to check them up, of course, and I don't see we can go much further until we have done so."

"For the moment," said Alleyn, "let us suppose Masters Guy and Arthur to be safely established behind cast-iron alibis. What then?"

"Then we've got the young lady, the old lady, the secretary, and the servants."

"Let us parade them. But first let us go over the wireless game. You'll have to watch me here. I gather that the only way in which the radio could be fixed to give Mr. Tonks his quietus is like this: Control knobs removed. Holes bored in front panel with fine drill. Metal knobs substituted and packed with blotting paper to insulate them from metal shafts and make them stay put. Heavier flex from adapter to radiator cut and the ends of the wires pushed through the drilled holes to make contact with the new knobs. Thus we have a positive and negative pole. Mr. Tonks bridges the gap, gets a mighty wallop as the current passes through him to the earth. The switchboard fuse is blown almost immediately. All this is rigged by murderer while Sep was upstairs bullying wife and daughter. Sep revisited study some time after ten twenty. Whole thing was made ready between ten, when Arthur went out, and the time Sep returned—say, about ten forty-five. The murderer

reappeared, connected radiator with flex, removed wires, changed back knobs, and left the thing tuned in. Now I take it that the burst of static described by Phillipa and Hislop would be caused by the short circuit that killed our Septimus?"

"That's right."

"It also affected all the heaters in the house. *Vide* Miss Tonks's radiator."

"Yes. He put all that right again. It would be a simple enough matter for anyone who knew how. He'd just have to fix the fuse on the main switchboard. How long do you say it would take to—what's the horrible word?—to recondition the whole show?"

"M'm," said Fox deeply. "At a guess, sir, fifteen minutes. He'd have to be nippy."

"Yes," agreed Alleyn. "He or she."

"I don't see a female making a success of it," grunted Fox. "Look here, chief, you know what I'm thinking. Why did Mr. Hislop lie about deceased's habit of licking his thumbs? You say Hislop told you he remembered nothing and Chase says he overheard him saying the trick nearly drove him dippy."

"Exactly," said Alleyn. He was silent for so long that Fox felt moved to utter a discreet cough.

"Eh?" said Alleyn. "Yes, Fox, yes. It'll have to be done." He consulted the telephone directory and dialed a number.

"May I speak to Dr. Meadows? Oh, it's you, is it? Do you remember Mr. Hislop telling you that Septimus Tonks's trick of wetting his fingers nearly drove Hislop demented? Are you there? You don't? Sure? All right. All right. Hislop rang you up at ten twenty, you said? And you telephoned him? At eleven. Sure of the times? I see. I'd be glad if you'd come round. Can you? Well, do if you can."

He hung up the receiver.

"Get Chase again, will you, Fox?"

Chase, recalled, was most insistent that Mr. Hislop had spoken about it to Dr. Meadows.

"It was when Mr. Hislop had flu, sir. I went up with the doctor. Mr. Hislop had a high temperature and was talking very excited. He kept on and on, saying the master had guessed his ways had driven him crazy and that the master kept on purposely to aggravate. He said if it went on much longer he'd . . . he didn't know what he was talking about, sir, really."

"What did he say he'd do?"

"Well, sir, he said he'd—he'd do something desperate to the mas-

ter. But it was only his rambling, sir. I daresay he wouldn't remember anything about it."

"No," said Alleyn, "I daresay he wouldn't." When Chase had gone he said to Fox: "Go and find out about those boys and their alibis. See if they can put you on to a quick means of checking up. Get Master Guy to corroborate Miss Phillipa's statement that she was locked in her room."

Fox had been gone for some time and Alleyn was still busy with his notes when the study door burst open and in came Dr. Meadows.

"Look here, my giddy sleuth-hound," he shouted, "what's all this about Hislop? Who says he disliked Sep's abominable habits?"

"Chase does. And don't bawl at me like that. I'm worried."

"So am I, blast you. What are you driving at? You can't imagine that . . . that poor little broken-down hack is capable of electrocuting anybody, let alone Sep?"

"I have no imagination," said Alleyn wearily.

"I wish to God I hadn't called you in. If the wireless killed Sep, it was because he'd monkeyed with it."

"And put it right after it had killed him?"

Dr. Meadows stared at Alleyn in silence.

"Now," said Alleyn, "you've got to give me a straight answer, Meadows. Did Hislop, while he was semidelirious, say that this habit of Tonks's made him feel like murdering him?"

"I'd forgotten Chase was there," said Dr. Meadows.

"Yes, you'd forgotten that."

"But even if he did talk wildly, Alleyn, what of it? Damn it, you can't arrest a man on the strength of a remark made in delirium."

"I don't propose to do so. Another motive has come to light."

"You mean—Phips—last night?"

"Did he tell you about that?"

"She whispered something to me this morning. I'm very fond of Phips. My God, are you sure of your grounds?"

"Yes," said Alleyn. "I'm sorry. I think you'd better go, Meadows."

"Are you going to arrest him?"

"I have to do my job."

There was a long silence.

"Yes," said Dr. Meadows at last. "You have to do your job. Good-bye, Alleyn."

Fox returned to say that Guy and Arthur had never left their parties. He had got hold of two of their friends. Guy and Mrs. Tonks confirmed the story of the locked door.

"It's a process of elimination," said Fox. "It must be the secretary. He fixed the radio while deceased was upstairs. He must have dodged back to whisper through the door to Miss Tonks. I suppose he waited somewhere down here until he heard deceased blow himself to blazes and then put everything straight again, leaving the radio turned on."

Alleyn was silent.

"What do we do now, sir?" asked Fox.

"I want to see the hook inside the front door where they hang their keys."

Fox, looking dazed, followed his superior to the little entrance hall.

"Yes, there they are," said Alleyn. He pointed to a hook with two latchkeys hanging from it. "You could scarcely miss them. Come on, Fox."

Back in the study they found Hislop with Bailey in attendance. Hislop looked from one Yard man to another.

"I want to know if it's murder."

"We think so," said Alleyn.

"I want you to realize that Phillipa—Miss Tonks—was locked in her room all last night."

"Until her brother came home and unlocked the door," said Alleyn.

"That was too late. He was dead by then."

"How do you know when he died?"

"It must have been when there was that crash of static."

"Mr. Hislop," said Alleyn, "why would you not tell me how much that trick of licking his fingers exasperated you?"

"But—how do you know! I never told anyone."

"You told Dr. Meadows when you were ill."

"I don't remember." He stopped short. His lips trembled. Then, suddenly he began to speak.

"Very well. It's true. For two years he's tortured me. You see, he knew something about me. Two years ago when my wife was dying, I took money from the cash box in that desk. I paid it back and thought he hadn't noticed. He knew all the time. From then on, he had me where he wanted me. He used to sit there like a spider. I'd hand him a paper. He'd wet his thumbs with a clicking noise and a sort of complacent grimace. Click, click. Then he'd thumb the papers. He knew it drove me crazy. He'd look at me and then . . . click, click. And then he'd say something about the cash.

He never quite accused me, just hinted. And I was impotent. You think I'm insane. I'm not. I could have murdered him. Often and often I've thought how I'd do it. Now you think I've done it. I haven't. There's the joke of it. I hadn't the pluck. And last night when Phillipa showed me she cared, it was like Heaven—unbelievable. For the first time since I've been here I *didn't* feel like killing him. And last night someone else *did*."

He stood there trembling and vehement. Fox and Bailey, who had watched him with bewildered concern, turned to Alleyn. He was about to speak when Chase came in. "A note for you, sir," he said to Alleyn. "It came by hand."

Alleyn opened it and glanced at the first few words. He looked up.

"You may go, Mr. Hislop. Now I've got what I expected—what I fished for."

When Hislop had gone they read the letter.

Dear Alleyn,

Don't arrest Hislop. I did it. Let him go at once if you've arrested him and don't tell Phips you ever suspected him. I was in love with Isabel before she met Sep. I've tried to get her to divorce him, but she wouldn't because of the kids. Damned nonsense, but there's no time to discuss it now. I've got to be quick. He suspected us. He reduced her to a nervous wreck. I was afraid she'd go under altogether. I thought it was all out. Some weeks ago I took Phips's key from the hook inside the front door. I had the tools and the flex and wire all ready. I knew where the main switchboard was and the cupboard. I meant to wait until they all went away at the New Year, but last night when Hislop rang me I made up my mind to act at once. He said the boys and servants were out and Phips locked in her room. I told him to stay in his room and to ring me up in half an hour if things hadn't quieted down. He didn't ring up. I did. No answer, so I knew Sep wasn't in his study.

I came round, let myself in, and listened. All quiet upstairs, but the lamp still on in the study, so I knew he would come down again. He'd said he wanted to get the midnight broadcast from somewhere.

I locked myself in and got to work. When Sep was away last year, Arthur did one of his modern monstrosities of

paintings in the study. He talked about the knobs making good pattern. I noticed then that they were very like the ones on the radio and later on I tried one and saw that it would fit if I packed it up a bit. Well, I did the job just as you worked it out, and it only took twelve minutes. Then I went into the drawing room and waited.

He came down from Isabel's room and evidently went straight to the radio. I hadn't thought it would make such a row, and half expected someone would come down. No one came. I went back, switched off the wireless, mended the fuse in the main switchboard, using my torch. Then I put everything right in the study.

There was no particular hurry. No one would come in while he was there, and I got the radio going as soon as possible to suggest he was at it. I knew I'd be called in when they found him. My idea was to tell them he had died of a stroke. I'd been warning Isabel it might happen at any time. As soon as I saw the burned hand, I knew that cat wouldn't jump. I'd have tried to get away with it if Chase hadn't gone round bleating about electrocution and burned fingers. Hislop saw the hand. I daren't do anything but report the case to the police, but I thought you'd never twig the knobs. One up to you.

I might have bluffed through if you hadn't suspected Hislop. Can't let you hang the blighter. I'm enclosing a note to Isabel, who won't forgive me, and an official one for you to use. You'll find me in my bedroom upstairs. I'm using cyanide. It's quick.

I'm sorry, Alleyn. I think you knew, didn't you? I've bungled the whole game, but if you will be a super-sleuth . . . Goodbye.

Henry Meadows

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W.J. Burley

“**D**etective Chief Superintendent Wycliffe, Area C.I.D., in a fawn linen jacket, checked shirt and grey slacks, looked even less like a policeman than usual. He had the right, he was on holiday though paying a courtesy call at the local police station.” In 1970, in *To Kill A Cat*, that was our introduction to the estimable Wycliffe, who not unhappily leaves his wife Helen to the pleasures of their seaside resort and spends his vacation investigating the strangling and disfigurement of a beautiful young girl. When he catches himself humming a jaunty tune, he realizes that “it was the prospect of a case which made him sing. . . . To be brutally frank then, he was

happy because a woman lay dead in a sleazy hotel bedroom. Did he delight in crime? Surely a vicarious pleasure in vice must be at least as reprehensible as indulgence?”

Charles Wycliffe never answers his own questions, but readers of any or all of his eight adventures, recounted by W.J. Burley, are left with no doubt about the superintendent's motives. Wycliffe is a decent man, happily married and the father of twins, pleased with his modest home at river's edge. He isn't attracted to the violence inherent in his job, nor is he a thrill-seeker or vigilante. The truth is that Wycliffe is very, very good at police work. He is ever curious about people and their lives; he often does the

fieldwork himself, refusing to remain at his desk poring over piles of reports. He likes the interviews with the people involved in a case. He enjoys going through the desks, file cabinets, and bureau drawers of the victims. He is annoyed by the attitudes of the case doctors (pathologists and M.E.'s), and is usually estranged from the junior members of his team. He is a loner, searching for the criminal's motive, fascinated by the mazes of the mind.

"The windows of the houses had their curtains almost drawn; no sign of life from any of them, though Wycliffe had a feeling that his every movement was observed. He felt a bit like the Lone Ranger entering town, the only one who doesn't know that Billy the Kid is holding up the bank," writes Burley in *Wycliffe and the Beales*. The village reminds Wycliffe of his own, and so he understands the tight-knit community that will make his job of finding out the truth so much more challenging. In *Death in a Salubrious Place*, the setting is the remote Scilly Islands, and the victim is a local girl; and a little Cornish seaside town is the site of *Wycliffe and the Scapegoat*. As the townsfolk in all these places draw together in defense, Wycliffe's pose as the "Lone Ranger" becomes more accurate than imaginative.

Wycliffe's search for motive structures the plots of these novels. A preface to *Wycliffe and the Schoolgirls* relates the tale of a cruel joke played on a shy student, and thus suggests to the reader the possible motive behind several murders nine years later. Wycliffe must ferret out the whole truth; the reader must guess the reason for the murderer's bloodlust, the path from prank to deadly revenge. *Wycliffe and the Scapegoat* opens with a Halloween ritual, an annual event in a tiny Cornish town, which ends with a flaming effigy rolled off a cliff and into the ocean. When the local undertaker disappears, rumor has it that he may have been the "scapegoat," sent to a horrible death in full view of the townspeople (Wycliffe included). Stymied at one point in his investigation, Wycliffe absently watches a spider weaving its web, and for a moment he envies the entomologist, whose specimens—unlike Wycliffe's—need not be studied "in the wild." But we know Wycliffe. His depression is short-lived, and soon he is back onto the case at hand.

Don't look for humor, sex, or violence in these—not onstage, at least. Burley writes more in the tradition of Ruth Rendell; he prefers to peel away the illusions, the motives, the defenses of victim, suspect, and

perpetrator together. Burley shapes his novels in much the same way as his detective conducts an investigation: "He had found it best not to strain too hard after truth. Better to let impressions, facts, ideas and in-

cidents accumulate, mix and blend and crystallize in the slow chemistry of the mind."

(Burley is published in hardcover by the Doubleday Crime Club; in paper, by the Walker British Mystery series).

MYSTERY REVIEWS

Dell's "Scene of the Crime" series sent me Reginald Hill's **A Pinch of Snuff** (\$2.95, 271 pp.) the same week that Macmillan mailed me Hill's new hardcover novel, **Dead-Heads** (\$12.95, 275 pp.). Both feature the British police team of Pascoe and Dalziel, with their usual banter. (The acerbic Dalziel to patient his subordinate: "Good. I'll be able to send you out to post a letter before you're much older.") *Pinch* is set around London's Callopie Kinema Club, a once-posh prep school that is now a private movie club—a "blue" movie club. Pascoe begins unofficially investigating it when his dentist confides his fear that a recent movie he saw there actually depicted a brutal beating. The dentist swears that the woman's jaw was broken. When the proprietor is murdered soon after, Dalziel too gets involved. *Dead-Heads* refers to a gardener's term for popping off the wilted blooms of a rosebush so that the new blooms will open. On a less mundane level, it appears to be the philosophy of a strange young man whose career and fortune coincidentally rise in relation to someone else's death. Or is it a coincidence? The writing here is strong, if offbeat, and the story should appeal most to those of you who enjoy black comedy.

Anthony Olcott brings back his protagonist, the Russian Ivan Duvakin (*Murder at the Red October*), in his latest novel. **Mayday in Magadan** finds the ill-fated Duvakin in a bleak and remote outpost in Russian territory, with few prospects of ever getting back to his beloved Moscow. And when he instinctively catches a petty fur smuggler—and finds himself deep in paperwork—he is cursing his lot once again. But the arrest has opened up something huge, something hidden, something political, because several deaths occur soon after the incident. Then Duvakin's old arch-enemy, the powerful Polkolnikov, turns up, and Duvakin finds himself, once again, the ignorant pawn in a deadly power struggle. Olcott vividly creates a Russian milieu that neatly balances tedium with terror, and Duvakin is a three-dimensional "common man" with whom readers will sympathize. A serpentine plot, strong char-

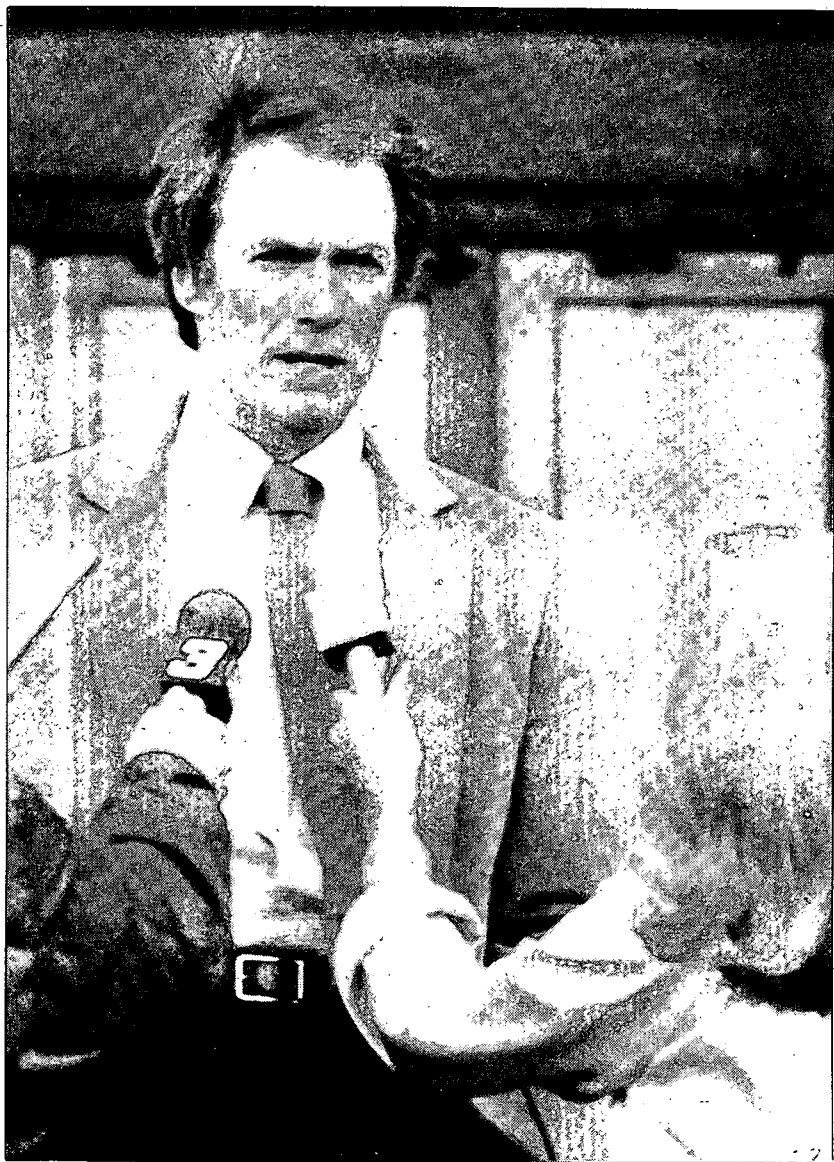
acters, and a careful portrait of a country and its ways, so foreign to most Americans—all this adds up to a novel of great power, and pure pleasure. (Bantam Books, \$3.50, 336 pp.)

Matt Cobb is the "Network's" V.P. in charge of special projects in **Killed on the Ice** by William DeAndrea. That generally means trouble-shooting, which Matt and his loyal staff are experts at. This time Olympic iceskater Wendy Ichimi is being annoyed by a celeb shrink, a left-wing media favorite once a friend of Wendy's deceased father. The "Network" has paid Wendy big bucks to star in their Christmas ice show, so Cobb is detailed to keep the shrink away from her. Someone does just that. Cobb finds his corpse on the deserted ice rink—and Wendy is one of the suspects. There's another murder and a savage beating, plus secrets to be pried from the past, before Cobb clears up the mayhem that began in Madison Square Garden. A fast read, with some fresh twists, and Cobb is worthy of starring in one of his own "Network's" TV-series shows. (Doubleday & Company/Crime Club, \$11.95, 181 pp.)

Swan Song is, despite its title, T.J. Binyon's first novel. An auspicious debut it is, and sure to please fans of *Gorky Park* and *Murder at the Red October*. Set in Moscow in the 1970's, *Swan Song* is the story of a thirtyish university professor whose carefree student days seem far behind him. Yet it is a trip to the country taken twelve years earlier with three friends that is, in some obscure way, the reason Vanya Morozov now finds himself involved with a KGB agent, a charismatic religious leader—and the fragile woman he once loved. Atmospheric, evocative, and original. (Delacorte Press, \$14.95, 203 pp.)

A taut American police procedural by William Krasner, **Death of a Minor Poet** reprises homicide captain Sam Birge. Here Sam tries to learn why a harmless young man was beaten to death in a dingy hallway above a cafe known as an artists' haunt. This is quiet, steady, solid, with a shocker ending. (Scribner's, \$12.95, 180 pp.)

Another police procedural, set in Chicago, is Joe Gash's **Priestly Murders**. When a young Catholic priest is shot at a seven A.M. Mass by a killer dressed in the uniform of a policeman, Sergeant Terry Flynn and his Special Squad are assigned to the case. The job is made no easier by Flynn's Irish temper, nor does it help that his men are getting pressure from the press, politicians, the commissioner—even the Chancery. Strong characters and a suspenseful climax make it a standout. (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, \$11.95, 163 pp.)



Homicide detective Wes Block—played by Clint Eastwood—being interviewed in *Tightrope*.

MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



From a mystery fan's point of view, **Tightrope** is far and away Clint Eastwood's most satisfying crime movie. In the Dirty Harry series of police thrillers, all the interest lies in Eastwood's grim doggedness and bravery. This time, as homicide detective Wes Block, he has to employ psychological insight plus a lot more routine police work in order to get his man.

The killer is a serial sex murderer who uses police handcuffs to bind his female victims before torturing and strangling them. These grisly details prove to have a more than forensic importance. For it turns out that Eastwood is going through a hard patch of his life after divorce, and has proved to be susceptible to some of the same

sexual perversities as the psychopathic killer. Eastwood, too, likes to use his policeman's handcuffs on women. And as he makes his way through the New Orleans demimonde of pleasure palaces and massage parlors, he proves susceptible to some of the "kinky" sexual diversions that are offered him.

As the clues to the murderer's identity begin to accumulate—white male in his forties, policeman or former policeman, use of handcuffs—the profile applies all too well to Eastwood himself. The parallels between the pursuer and pursued get really interesting when it turns out that Eastwood is being stalked by the killer, who stakes out and kills the women Eastwood has dallied with. Finally, those who

matter most to Eastwood are threatened: his two young daughters and the woman with whom he has finally been able to have a serious involvement. Played by Genevieve Bujold, this spunky director of the city's rape center challenges Eastwood's capacity to have a normal sexual relationship.

Tightrope's central idea is stated in the line, "There's a darkness inside all of us." Eastwood has to fight his dark sexual hangups, whereas before he could rely on his fists and his gun. And when Genevieve Bujold is threatened, he changes more of his thinking. Her efforts at training women to fight rapists had amused him. But now she holds off the killer just long enough for Eastwood to save her. The moral seems to be that these days women do have to take a hand in protecting themselves, although they may still have to rely on a strong male protector as well.

As in the past, that protector has to be in top shape for a long, final chase. It takes place at night, follows along the edges of the city, goes through a graveyard and then into a railroad yard for the showdown.

These are cliché locations, as are some of the predictably alternating police station and home scenes early in the movie. But Eastwood's intense authenticity makes it all work. Furthermore, he has brought new resources to this role. He starts out with a cop's imperturbability as he views the first corpse, but he is shaken when he views a later victim whom he has known. By dealing with moral complexities on both sides of the line between criminality and the law, *Tightrope* lifts Eastwood out of the shoot 'em up cops and robbers genre and brings him into the realm of the psychological thriller. Welcome aboard, Clint, we've been waiting for you.

The Jigsaw Man is an intricately-plotted, double agent espionage puzzler. It is based on the famous succession of British secret service operatives who have betrayed their country since the 1940's. The director has somehow managed to waste both a good plot and the talents of Michael Caine. In addition, he has extracted a blustering, unconvincing performance from Sir Laurence Olivier.

THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress

The August Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Brian McCullough of Kanata, Ontario, Canada. Honorable mentions go to Jim Barrett of Ojai, California; Glen E. Dittus of Elmhurst, Illinois; Brian Marczyk of West Chester, Pennsylvania; Joclaire Achatz of Amherst, New York; Alan N. Tremba of Barnesboro, Pennsylvania; Don Shaffer of San Mateo, California; Reva M. Butler of Fort Myers, Florida; Kim E. Nay of Noorvik, Alaska; Betty Human of Modesto, California; and Gil Anderson of Barstow, California.

CANARY BEACH by Brian McCullough

Sergeant Browne threw his surfboard onto the sand and sat down on it. "The way I see it, sir, a surf bum murdered Lord McIvor."

Chief Inspector Dell considered Browne's statement. Lady McIvor was a well-known Brisbane ornithologist. Two days ago she had reported her husband missing on the North Coast. The two policemen disguised in bathing robes and wigs were patrolling Canary Beach looking for clues when they found the missing man. He was as dead as a seashell.

"Why a surfer?" Dell asked.

"Because of the surfboard marking the grave," Browne replied.

"Surfboard! When you brushed your back against it a moment ago, sergeant, it cut you as neatly as if it had been a razor blade. Surely a surfboard couldn't be that sharp."

"What are you driving at, inspector?"

"I've spent enough time beachcombing the North Coast to know a giant cuttlebone when I see one, sergeant."

"Cuttlebone! You mean those things people stick in birdcages for their canaries to peck on?"

"Precisely. And who but a bird fancier would give in to the temptation of using a cuttlebone to mark a grave on Canary Beach?"

Of course. How stupid of me, Browne thought to himself. "Lady McIvor murdered her husband?" he ventured aloud.

Dell threw off his wig and struggled to work the cuttlebone out of the sand. "We'll make an inspector out of you yet, sergeant."

"Well, I'll be damned," Browne muttered. "I'll be double damned."

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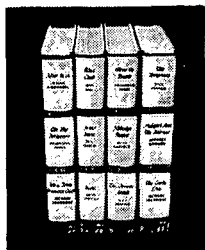
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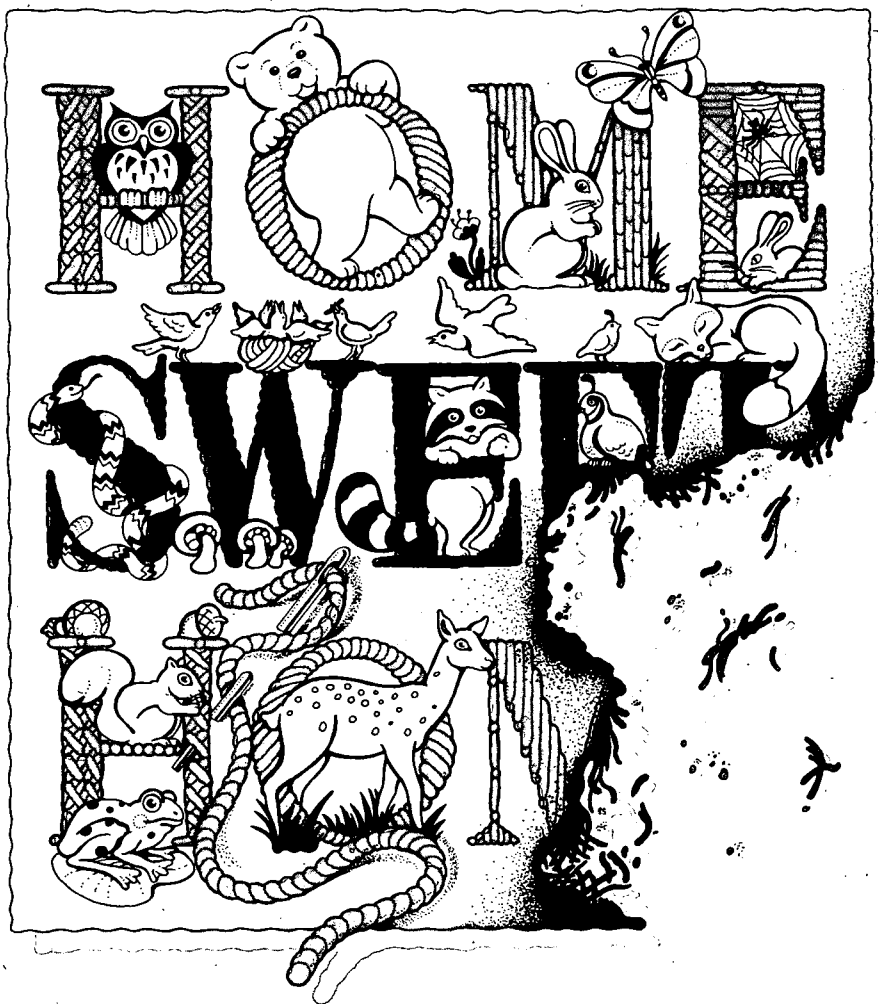
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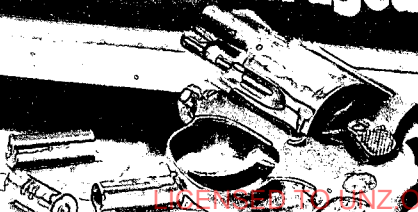
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